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FEBRUARY 15, 2021 ₹75

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INDIA TODAY

BUDGET 2021

A BOLD NEW DEAL

THE MODI GOVERNMENT SPENDS BIG AND BETS ON PRIVATISATION TO BANKROLL ITS AMBITIOUS ECONOMIC REVIVAL PLAN

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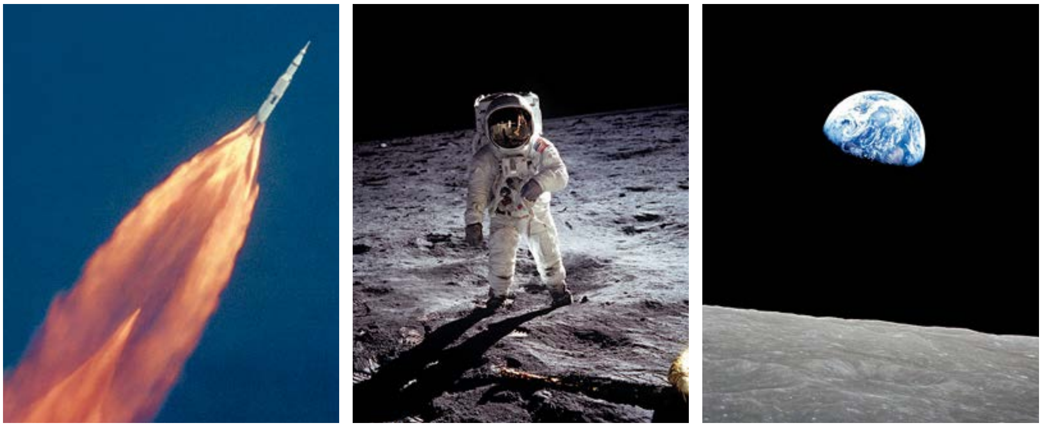

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FROM THE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It was music to my ears when I heard finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman say in her budget speech: “Sir, I now come to the last of one of our core principles of ‘minimum government, maximum governance’”. This was the slogan Candidate Narendra Modi had coined in the historic 2014 general election, with the explanation that the “government had no business being in business”. It gave me hope that the NDA-II government, with a full majority, would follow an even more aggressive disinvestment programme than the one the A.B. Vajpayee-led NDA-I attempted. Also, that it would have a more market-driven approach to solving the nation’s economic problems rather than the UPA mindset of welfarism that paid scant attention to economic growth which could pay for all the entitlements. However, soon after being elected, the Modi government lost its mojo for reform when it failed to get its land acquisition bill passed and was stung sharply by Rahul Gandhi’s charge of being a ‘suit-boot *ki sarkar*’. What followed for the next six years was maximum government, and more maximum government. The bureaucratic control got stronger, overriding even ministers, enforcement agencies went on steroids and decision-making in both the private and public sector seemed struck by paralysis. Demonetisation in November 2016 did not help. The economy had already been in decline for two years when the pandemic hit.

Budget 2021-22, therefore, is a clarion call for a quantum shift in India’s economic direction even though presenting a budget amid a recession is like reading a map while driving through a storm. You have a vague idea where you are headed but are unsure how long the squall will last or how quickly you will reach your destination. India’s Covid-19 curve is declining and 3.7 million people have been vaccinated so far, but its economy remains in the ICU. The double whammy of the pandemic and lockdown means the GDP will contract by 7.7 per cent this year. Unemployment has surged and small and medium businesses are dying.

The government has its hands full. It has hiked spending on health by 137 per cent—and will spend Rs 2.23 lakh crore on health and wellbeing. The budget followed what our panel of experts suggested in our January 25 cover story, ‘Now Spend Big’. The government has stepped on the pedal and hiked the fiscal deficit to a record 9.5 per cent while disclosing a welcome degree of transparency in its calculation. It has increased capital expenditure to 34 per cent of the budget. The defence allocation, for instance, has seen a close to 20 per cent increase in capital expenditure, which the armed forces will use to buy new hardware to confront the Chinese threat on the border. The government plans to jumpstart the economy and provide jobs for millions affected by the downturn. All this calls for money. Lots of it.

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. In this budget, however, it is more the discovery of courage—to ignore the predictable carping of the Opposition of selling the family silver. Budget 2021-22 makes a strong case for the government to monetise its assets and sell strategic stakes in the government-controlled PSUs. The government wants to privatise ports, banks, insurance firms, the running of railways, and unlock money lodged in government-owned land banks. It has set for itself a new disinvestment target of Rs 1.75 lakh crore for 2021-22.

The government’s privatisation mantra is not new, of course. It has to be a continuation of government interventions the finance minister announced last year to kickstart the economy. Among them was disinvestment where the government said it would have no more than four PSUs in strategic sectors. The Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM) was given a disinvestment target of Rs 2.1 lakh crore for FY21, but it expects to realise only Rs 32,000 crore. This, despite markets surging to record highs in the second half of the fiscal year and the financial system being flush with liquidity. That is the nub of the problem. Implementation.

Our cover package, ‘A Bold New Deal’, focuses on the government’s economic revival package through massive capital expenditure which not only creates jobs but also assets. This deal will be partly financed through the sale of government holdings. The government is betting on raising resources through privatisation and monetising public assets. Our bureau examines the politics behind this deal, the disinvestment strategy and the government’s plan for key sectors such as defence, health and education.

Most importantly, for privatisation, the government needs to devise a time-bound programme helmed by financial experts with the experience of such an exercise and not bureaucrats who are driven more by the instinct to retain control. The proposal to privatise Air India, for instance, was first discussed two decades ago and is still nowhere near completion. Those making such decisions also need to be protected from future prosecution. Unlike what happened to Arun Shourie, disinvestment minister in the Vajpayee government, and four others, against whom a special CBI court issued arrest warrants only last year in connection with the sale of an ITDC hotel 18 years ago. Eventually, the Rajasthan High Court had to step in and order a stay. It is enough to scare anyone tasked with executing the government’s ambitious programme.

If the government can get over such hurdles and stand by its convictions, there are rich pickings to be had. PSUs and departments like defence and railways, which have huge land banks, can monetise their surplus and add to the government’s coffers. There are 80 PSUs whose cumulative loss of Rs 81,444 crore is a drain on the exchequer. On the other hand, Hindustan Zinc, in which the government divested 45 per cent for Rs 769 crore in 2002 and sold some more equity later, yielded the government dividend of Rs 17,690 crore between 2004 and 2020 while its present stake of 29.54 per cent has a valuation of Rs 36,041 crore. Maruti is another case. Founded as a 74:26 JV between Suzuki and the government in 1982, the latter first raised its stake to half, then reduced it to 49.74 in 1992, before the Vajpayee government decided to sell it altogether in 2002. By the time the stake was fully sold in 2007, the Centre got Rs 5,928 crore. Today, the firm is worth Rs 2.3 lakh crore, the 16th most valued company by market cap, employing 16,000 people. Lifting the dead hand of the government unleashes the magic of private enterprise, of which we have plenty in India.

Nothing works like a crisis to get reform moving in our country. Tardy execution or losing your nerve are the only hurdles to the government’s plan to exit business. Clearly, this is where Prime Minister Modi and finance minister Sitharaman have their work cut out. They will be judged not for their good intentions, but for the execution. Else disinvestment and privatisation, like several other government plans, will likely remain just that—statements of good intent with nothing tangible to show.

(Aroon Purie)

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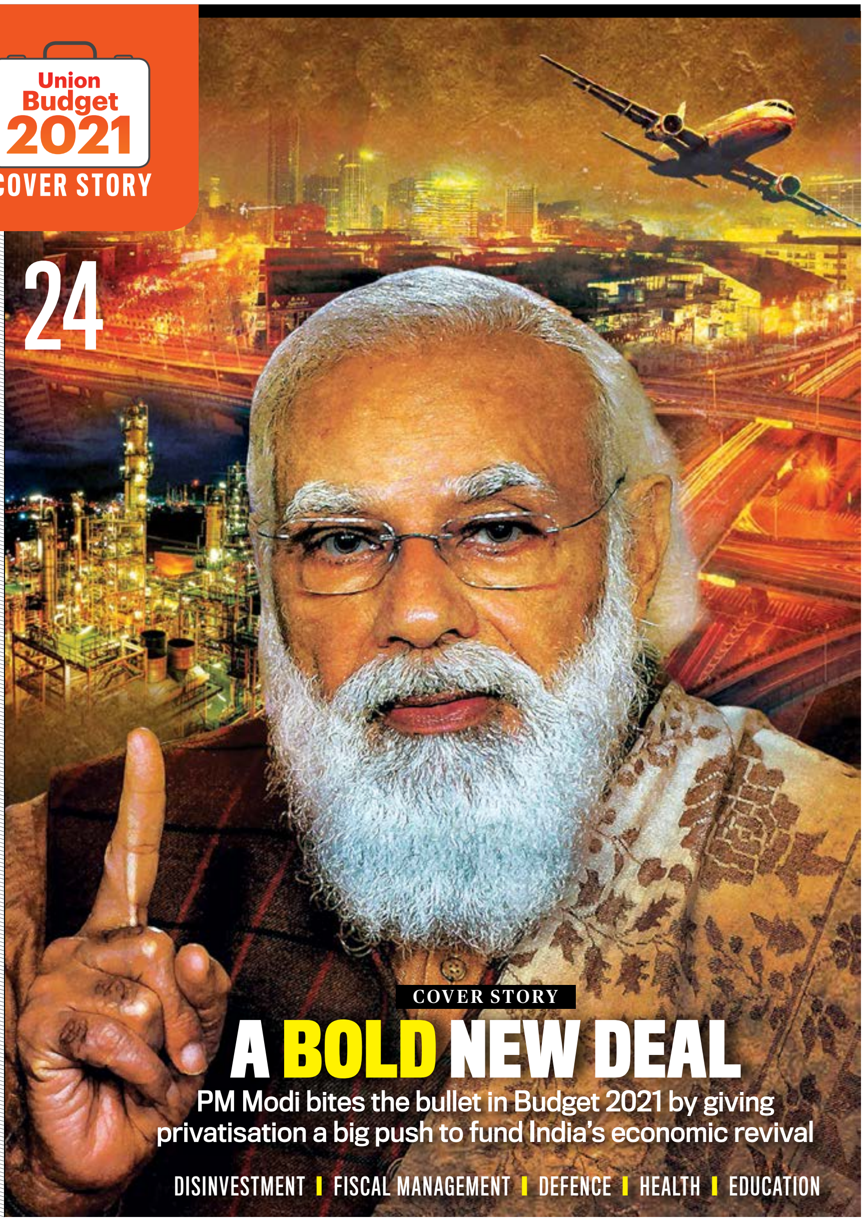

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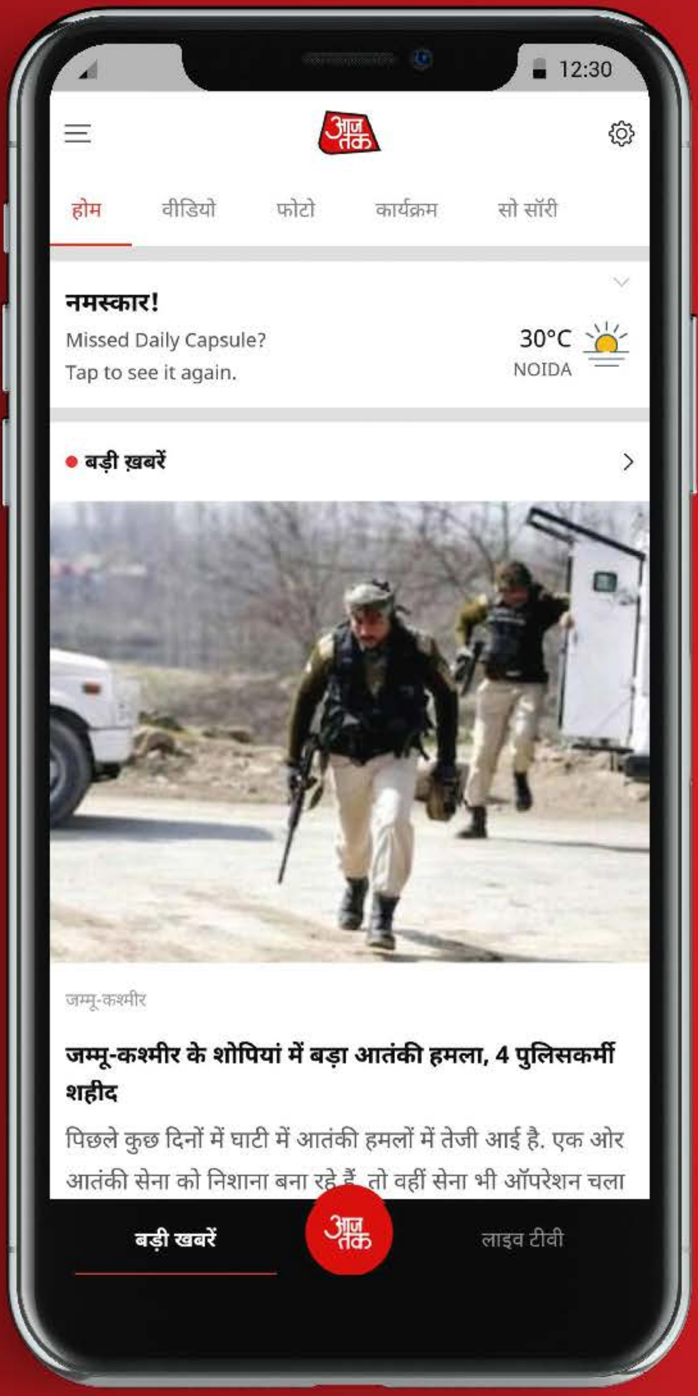

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बड़ी खबरें लाइव टीवी

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WOMEN POWER
Mamata marches with other women on International Women's Day, March 8, 2019

ANI

WEST BENGAL

WHY HER VOTE COUNTS

By Romita Datta

In the Battle for Bengal, which goes to polls simultaneously with four other Indian states this April, the woman voter seems to be getting some extra attention. Not without reason, and even as all other possible lines of attack and/ or appeasement are also being pursued in tandem.

It's not simply their numerical significance that is making all political parties queue up; it's also the observed increased proclivity of women to turn up for the vote: in Bihar, which went to polls most recently in October-November last year, more women (59.7 per cent) turned out to vote than men (54.7 per cent). And so it is that the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC), its primary challenger BJP, and even the Congress have all activated their women's wings. Each of them is busily taking down the other's record on issues such as women's safety and jostling to highlight what they have done for women's welfare.

At 35.9 million, women voters comprise roughly half the state's electorate—and have come a long way from the days of being terrorised to keep their men indoors on election day, when the Left was in power (bales of white cloth, signifying a widow's attire, would be sent to them). They are now more vocal against injustices and demanding their rights. They can be seen craning their necks at Mamata Banerjee's rallies and shouting out their grievances in the middle of

HERE'S THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUTH.

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But here's what we know. Whether it's whispered or stated, whether it's at sixty decibels or six, truth is louder.

Truth is louder even with the mute button on. Truth is louder than breaking news. Truth is louder than the one who speaks it.

Here's to 45 years of celebrating the truth.

TRUTH IS LOUDER.

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45TH ANNIVERSARY

the chief minister's speeches. "Earlier, Mamata would have them arrested, as she did in 2013, when a farmer tried to question her about the rising fertiliser prices during a political rally. But now she's giving them a hearing, as the times have changed," says a senior police officer, requesting anonymity.

Indeed, the 2019 Lok Sabha election was a timely wake-up call for Mamata, who found the BJP breathing down her neck—with 18 seats, just four less than the TMC's 22, and a vote share of 40 per cent, just three percentage points less than the TMC's. Not only is the BJP nipping at her heels, Mamata also has anti-incumbency to contend with, besides a third contender, the Congress-Left combine, which threatens to chip away at her support in committed vote banks. Hence the desperation to keep everyone happy. Especially women, whose contribution Prime Minister Narendra Modi specifically acknowledged in the BJP's success in Bihar. In his victory speech after the Bihar results, the prime minister lauded the women as the party's 'silent voters', saying, "The echo of these 'silent voters' must be ringing in everyone's ears today." He attributed their support to the women-centric schemes of his government, eliding, of course, the Nitish Kumar state government's steadfast focus on this constituency—in policies such as prohibition, reservation for women in local bodies and empowering them through self-help groups.

THE TRINAMOOL OFFENSIVE

If the BJP is hoping to work the same magic in West Bengal, Mamata is not sitting back either. If the BJP is tom-tomming schemes like Ujjwala, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and Ayushman Bharat, the TMC is going to town talking about women-specific schemes (see *Mamata's Welfare Model for Women*). The latest in this bouquet is the Swasthya Sathi health card, which, in a move laden with some significance, is issued in the name of the household matriarch. "Mamata Banerjee has recognised the woman as a person, given her respect and empowered her socio-economically. Who would have thought that by issuing a health card for the family in her name, she would [challenge] the patriarchal structure of a household, where women are [only ever] seen as someone's mother, wife or daughter?" asks minister of state for health Chandrima Bhattacharya.

Carrying Mamata's message around are the Banga Janani Vahinis, the women's brigade Mamata floated shortly after the 2019 Lok Sabha election. The party's women's wing has led protests on women-centric issues, such as against the Hathras rape in October, when the participants carried banners declaring 'The Dalit woman is our daughter'. Now it is preparing to launch a programme called 'Ranna Ghore Ranna Hobe', a call to action for rural homemakers, urging them to not feel obliged to dine and entertain 'outsiders' who turn up at their doorstep. The obvious reference is to a gimmick lately employed by BJP leaders, turning up at tribal homes to share a meal.

> **AT 35.9 MN, WOMEN MAKE UP HALF THE STATE'S ELECTORATE. A HIGH TURNOUT WILL PLAY A BIG HAND IN DETERMINING THE OUTCOME**

The TMC is also losing no opportunity to paint the BJP as misogynistic. In the last Lok Sabha election, the TMC was at pains to point out how the prime minister had neglected his own wife and how someone who had turned his back on family could not be trusted to responsibly shoulder the burden of the nation. As it happened, it made no impact on the voters but it hasn't deterred the TMC from taking on BJP leaders for their sexist comments. For instance, on January 4, when Mamata stopped at a roadside eatery in Ballavpur in Birbhum and lent a helping hand to the woman cooking the food, Kailash Vijayvargiya, the BJP's minder for Bengal, was quick to tweet—"Didi has already started doing the work she will have to do after five months." In no time, social media was bristling and alive with criticism. Lok Sabha MP Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar counter-tweeted: "If you are a woman and have political aspirations, remember our country is plagued with misogynists from the BJP. Can't imagine the lack of respect women in Kailash Vijayvargiya's family must be facing." Cabinet minister Shashi Panja followed: "This is what they think of the only sitting female CM in India. No wonder our women are not safe under their rule...." Basirhat MP Nusrat Jahan called it an insult to "every single woman who cooks, provides for families and has aspirations".

More recently, former Tripura governor Tathagata Roy shared an image from actor Saayoni Ghosh's 2015 Twitter post, which showed a *shivling* as part of an AIDS awareness campaign. Alleging that the image hurt Hindu sentiments, he filed a police complaint against her. Accusing him of being a dotard, Mamata admonished him for "threatening someone as young as his grand-daughter's daughter".

The TMC raised a similar hue and cry when actor Deboleena Dutta was trolled and threatened with rape when she said on a TV chat show that she didn't mind beef during Durga puja. The TMC went all out to exploit the issue, holding street corner meetings with Tollywood film stars to lambast the BJP for threatening women with rape. "Women of Bengal, who have a woman as a chief minister, are not afraid of such hollow threats of rape and atrocities," Nusrat Jahan declared on January 25. "I challenge you to try it with us. We have brooms, sharp knives to defend ourselves."

THE SAFFRON RETORT

As part of its counter-strategy, the BJP is taking on the TMC's record on safety of women, discrimination in Amphan relief, corruption in the government and the party's terror tactics. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, women in rural Bengal came out in large numbers to drive away TMC hooligans with their kitchen

MAMATA'S WELFARE MODEL FOR WOMEN

KANYASHREE PRAKALPA

Scholarship of Rs 1,000 per annum for girls aged 13-18
Outlay: Rs 1,500 crore a year; Rs 10,000 crore spent since 2013
Beneficiaries: 6.9 million girls

RUPASHREE PRAKALPA

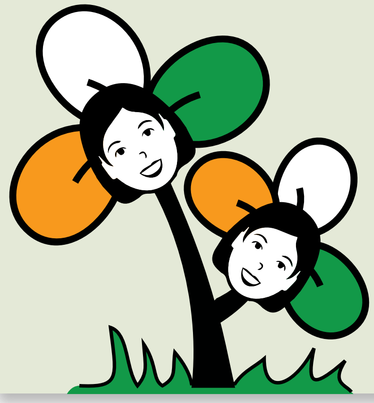
Rs 25,000 for marriage of girls from families with annual income less than Rs 1.5 lakh after they attain 18 years
Outlay: Rs 1,500 crore a year
Beneficiaries: 600,000 girls

KANYASHREE UNIVERSITY

Set up in Krishnanagar, Nadia district, in 2020 for educational empowerment of women. Assured admission for girls covered under Kanyashree

DIAMOND HARBOUR WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY

Set up in 2013, it caters to students from the remote Sundarbans



GOVT GIRLS GENERAL DEGREE COLLEGE

All-women's minority college set up in 2016 in Ekbalpur, Kolkata. The state government also runs 21 hostels for women in polytechnics

SABOOJ SATHI

Launched in 2015, the scheme provides free bicycles for girls of classes 9 to 12 studying in government and government-aided schools and madrasas
Outlay: Rs 2,700 crore a year
Beneficiaries: 8.5 million

MUKTIR ALO

Launched in 2015 for rehabilitation of sex workers and victims of sex trafficking
Outlay: Rs 56 lakh
Beneficiaries: 75 sex workers

MATERNITY/ CHILD CARE LEAVE

For women employed with the state government, upto two years' leave to be taken in stages

SWASTHYA SATHI HEALTH CARD

Issued in the name of the family matriarch and the benefits extended to her family, parents and in-laws. Coverage of Rs 1.5 lakh for general illness, Rs 5 lakh for terminal illness
Outlay: Rs 2,000 crore per year
Beneficiaries: 95 million

utensils. A few months ago, the BJP's Mahila Morcha took out a rally wielding broomsticks to protest discrimination in Amphan relief distribution and compensation. Following the furore the TMC raised in Bengal over the rape of a Dalit woman in Hathras, the BJP launched 'Aar Noi Mahilader Asuraksha', a door-to-door campaign to tell women in Bengal how unsafe their state had become for *Aat-theke-Aashi* (eight to 80)/ *Teen-theke-tirashi* (three to 83). "We are trying to tell women with data and statistics that crime against women and trafficking is very high, despite the state having a woman chief minister. Our chief minister is very prompt in raising an alarm whenever any incident of crime against women takes place in any other state. But when it happens in West Bengal, there is not even a strong word nor action against the culprits," junior Union minister of state for woman and child development Debasree Chaudhri said. It's a different matter that the campaign drew little attention.

Chaudhri also dismissed Mamata's policy of compensating rape victims. "Does Trinamool try to buy a woman's honour with hefty compensation?" she asked. In contrast, the BJP believes in ensuring strict punishment for rapists. Few have forgotten Mamata's alleged insensitivity in the Suzette Jordan case in 2012, which she dismissed as a "manufactured story".

The BJP is also trying to engage women in conversations about safety in their immediate neighbourhood, where Trinamool rowdies—*damaal chhele* in Mamata's words—have a free run.

Apart from this, the party plans to include women in its booth management strategy and organise a series of activities involving local women—from *padayatras* by Mahila Morcha workers in every booth and mandal to *prabhat pheris* (morning processions). Every booth and mandal committee will also have at least four women. Women will also be provided assistance in house work, whether taking care of ailing in-laws, taking them to hospital for treatment or for health check-ups, or helping the children with their studies. "All said and done, a woman is the centre of the family. We are trying to bring that awareness in each and every household," says Diptiman Sengupta, the BJP leader from north Bengal.

So, what are the BJP's chances in the assembly election? Will it do to Mamata in 2021 what she did to the Left in 2011? "Modi is a new factor for the women of Bengal and there is likely to be excitement and euphoria at his rallies as was evident in the 2019 campaigns. But I think there has been some diminishing of the 56-inch chest over his failure to address farmers' issues," says Prasanta Ray, professor emeritus of Presidency University.

However, Ratnaboli Roy, mental health activist and a prominent feminist voice in Bengal, finds the very idea that women should be targeted as a voting bloc regressive. "The gender of a chief minister should not be seen as a factor or an advantage as far as women voters are concerned," she says. "Gender consciousness depends on how you approach misogyny or female issues. Women are not stupid and do not need wooing. They know better than anyone else that freebies cannot win votes; respect and honour do."

One way of empowering women is to have more women fighting elections. And the TMC has never fought shy of fielding women candidates, in consonance with its policy of 33 per cent representation for women in panchayats, the state assembly and Parliament. Forty-one per cent of its candidates for the 2019 Lok Sabha election were women. ■

OXFAM INEQUALITY REPORT

HAVES AND HAVE NOTS

By M.G. Arun

The unprecedented economic disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in millions of Indians losing jobs, tens of thousands of factories downing shutters and the economy sinking into a deep recessionary hole. However, the extremely wealthy seem to have prospered—extremely, one may add—in the same period. A report by Oxfam, a confederation of charitable organisations, notes that Indian billionaires saw their wealth increase by 35 per cent from March 2020 onward, when the Centre announced one of the most stringent lockdowns in the world. This paradox also reflects in stock market performances through the pandemic. After a steep fall in the first weeks after the lockdown, markets rallied strongly—for instance, the BSE Sensex crossed 50,000 points for the first time ever on January 21 this year, partly because of a sustained inflow of funds from FIIs (foreign institutional investors). Though this surge is not backed by economic fundamentals, and the stock market could yo-yo back down, it added substantially to the wealth of those who were already wealthy. According to the Oxfam report, the gains made by just 11 billionaires (*see adjoining graphic*) during this period of economic stress would be enough to pay for India's health spending for 10 years.

Many economists have noted that the solid performance of most Indian corporates last year came from salary cuts and layoffs, not topline growth. Highlighting this paradox, the Oxfam report says that about 170,000 people lost their jobs every hour in April 2020. The report also argues for higher taxes on the wealthy to plug government budget deficits, pointing out that a one-time four per cent wealth tax on India's 954 richest families alone could raise 1 per cent of India's GDP in revenue. However, that viewpoint has few takers, and the counter-rationale most likely to be cited is that this is a time to focus on growth rather than correcting inequality. ■

400
MILLION
workers in the informal economy could be kept out of poverty for at least five months with just the windfall that Mukesh Ambani received during the pandemic

GAPING INEQUALITY

The pandemic has worsened inequality in both direct and indirect ways. Financial losses aside, the poorest Indians have also lost access to social safety nets, with women hit much worse than men

35%

The increase in Indian billionaires' wealth during the lockdown, up 90 per cent since 2009 to $422.9 bn. India is now ranked sixth globally in billionaire wealth, after the US, China, Germany, Russia and France

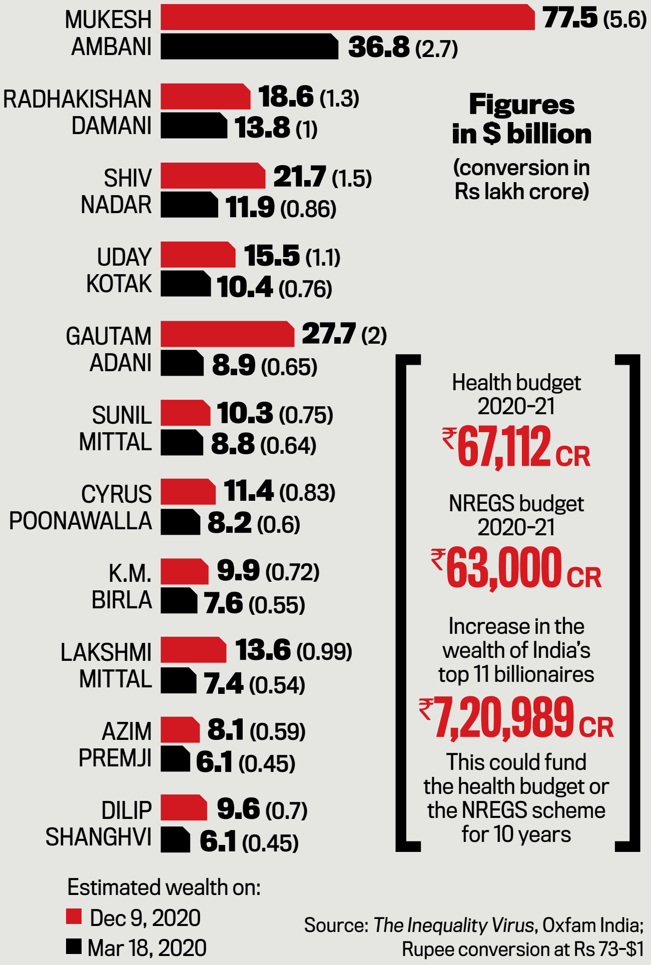
₹90
CRORE PER HOUR

Mukesh Ambani's effective earnings during the pandemic. In comparison, about 24 per cent of Indians were earning less than Rs 3,000 per month during the lockdown

₹12,97,822 crore

The increase in the wealth of 100 Indian billionaires since March 2020—enough to give each of the 138 million poorest Indians a cheque for Rs 94,045 each

COVID GAINS FOR INDIA'S 11 TOP BILLIONAIRES



Health budget 2020-21
₹67,112 CR

NREGS budget 2020-21
₹63,000 CR

Increase in the wealth of India's top 11 billionaires
₹7,20,989 CR
This could fund the health budget or the NREGS scheme for 10 years

Source: *The Inequality Virus*, Oxfam India; Rupee conversion at Rs 73-$1

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

JOB LOSSES

84%

of surveyed households suffered a loss in income in April 2020; 170,000 people lost their jobs every hour in the same month

92 mn

or 75% of the 122 million jobs lost during the pandemic were lost in the informal sector

GENDER BURDEN

17 mn

women lost their jobs in April 2020. They are also much less likely—an estimated 23.5 percentage points less than their male counterparts—to be re-employed in the post-lockdown phase

- The report predicts that the closing of family planning services will result in 2.95 million unintended pregnancies, 1.8 million abortions (including 1.04 million unsafe abortions) and 2,165 maternal deaths
- Pregnant women from poor families were often left unassisted during the lockdown, as most public healthcare institutions were turned into Covid-19 testing facilities and hospitals. One million fewer children were vaccinated in April 2020, risking the health of the next generation

EDUCATION: THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

320 mn

The number of students affected by the closure of educational institutions till the end of October. Of these, 84 per cent live in rural areas, with about 70 per cent attending government schools

120 mn

children in 1.26 million schools are covered by the mid-day meal (MDM) scheme, which has been disrupted by the closing of government schools. About 77.8 per cent of ST* and 69.4 per cent of SC** children study in these government schools, and heavily depend on the MDM scheme for nutrition

ONLY **2.7%**

of the poorest 20 per cent households in India have access to a computer and only 8.9 per cent to internet facilities. Over 96 per cent of ST* and SC** households with children in schools lack access to a computer

* Scheduled Tribe
** Scheduled Caste

ONLY **6%**

of the poorest 20 per cent have access to non-shared sources of improved sanitation, compared to 93.4 percent of the richest 20 per cent

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

PRESENT, PLEASE!
Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's roadshow in Erode, Jan. 24

ANI

TAMIL NADU POLLS

THE CONGRESS IN ITS LABYRINTH

By Amarnath K. Menon

On January 25, as former Congress president Rahul Gandhi returned to Delhi at the end of a three-day visit to Tamil Nadu (the second in 10 days), the prospects of his party's alliance with the DMK for the upcoming assembly poll remained uncertain. What caused the ripple was DMK leader and Arakkonam MP S. Jagathrakshakan's assertion that his party would lead the alliance in neighbouring Puducherry—where a Congress ministry steered by V. Narayanaswamy is in office—in the summer polls to the 30-seat Puducherry assembly. Meanwhile, DMK leaders were not invited to Rahul's meetings (all in the western part of Tamil Nadu), and he campaigned without canvassing for the coalition.

While many in the state Congress seemed certain that the Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA) will not hold, Rahul put doubts to rest as he told journalists at Aravakurichi in Karur district that the DMK-Congress alliance would continue, and that his party had accepted DMK president M.K. Stalin as their chief ministerial candidate. The latter too went on record on January 30, saying the alliance was on firm ground in Tamil Nadu, though he was quite evasive on how it would all work out in Puducherry.

It's early days but both Stalin and the chief ministerial candidate of the ruling AIADMK, incumbent Edappadi K. Palaniswami (EPS), have hinted during electioneering that their respective alliances may have to accommodate more parties than last time, implying fewer seats for the main allies (the Congress and the Left for the DMK and the BJP for the AIADMK). Both the Dravidian majors foresee a tough battle ahead and are keen to play to their strengths and secure a majority on their own in this first election after the passing of leaders M. Karunanidhi (DMK) and J. Jayalalithaa (AIADMK).

Early negotiations have begun with prospective allies and the Congress is worried about being allotted fewer constituencies than the 40 it got in 2016 (in the 235-seat House). The party won just seven seats with a 6.5 per cent vote share last time around. Party sources say they are being asked to settle for less but the Congress insists that considering the performance of the alliance in the 2019 Lok Sabha election (it won 38 of the 39 seats in the state), fewer seats than in 2016 would be demeaning.

"There is no issue in Tamil Nadu. We will discuss matters with our leadership and then the DMK regarding our strategy," says Dinesh Gundu Rao, AICC in-charge for the state and Puducherry. "All parties in the SPA will bring in their strengths to ensure the DMK comes to power," says a senior state Congress leader. He says there is no option for the party but to ride piggyback on the DMK, and admits that being limited to fewer constituencies will be seen as a sign that the Congress is in decline in the state.

Apart from Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, neighbouring Kerala is also going to polls at about the same time. The Congress-led United Democratic Front fancies its chances against the ruling Left Democratic Front there even though the results of the recent local body election seem to suggest the opposite.

In his campaign, Rahul focused on the "Tamil language and culture" to connect with the people and also target the BJP (as always, the saffron party's moves to impose Hindi puts it on the back foot in the state), even saying that he wanted to be a soldier of the Tamil people in Delhi. "The Congress is for an idea of India where every language and culture thrives," he added. Rahul also condemned the BJP's use of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to attack the ruling dispensation in Opposition-ruled states. "So, despite the numerous corruption allegations, why are the ED and CBI not investigating the Tamil Nadu chief minister? What has the CM given to Prime Minister (Narendra) Modi in exchange for this? That is the central question," he says. He also said that Modi had the remote control to the government of Tamil Nadu, and by the time the elections got over, the people of the state would have taken the batteries out of it.

ANI

It's still early days but DMK chief M.K. Stalin has hinted that the alliance may have to accommodate more parties this time, implying fewer seats for the Congress

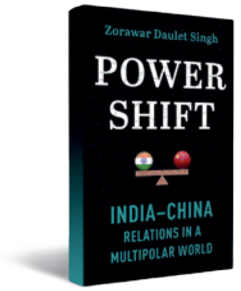
There has been some unease in the Congress about keeping its flock together, prompting the party to announce a major shuffle in the Tamil Nadu unit earlier in January. Some 32 vice-presidents, 57 general secretaries and 104 secretaries and several poll panels were announced, which even led to speculation that the Congress was going to contest the assembly polls alone. Party MP Karti Chidambaram had dissed the reshuffle, saying such "jumbo committees" served no purpose, that as a result no one would have any authority, which, in turn, would mean "no accountability". Others like senior leader Mani Shankar Aiyar maintain that large committees like the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee could bring the party together, reconciling differences in "the very top provincial leadership". He says the state has been run by "two irreconcilable factions of the AIADMK for five years now whose performance has not been sufficiently outstanding to win a third term in a row".

But the immediate challenge for the Congress is getting more constituencies allotted to the party. With Dr S. Ramadoss's Pattali Makkal Katchi demanding 20 per cent reservation in education and jobs for the Vanniyars, the prospects of them drifting away from the AIADMK-led alliance by early February is not ruled out. If that happens and it triggers a shift in the alliances of minor allies of both the DMK and AIADMK, the Congress could find itself in greater discomfort, especially in its claims to seats in south Tamil Nadu. ■

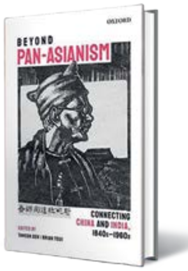
BOOKS

THE POWER OF TWO

By Chandrashekhar Dasgupta



POWER SHIFT
India-China Relations in
a Multipolar World
By Zorawar Daulet Singh
PAN MACMILLAN INDIA
₹650; 347 pages



BEYOND PAN-ASIANISM
Connecting China and India,
1840s-1960s
Edited by Tansen Sen & Brian Tsui
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
₹1,495; 489 pages

The bloody clashes in Ladakh last June raised basic questions about the continued effectiveness of the 1993 agreement in which India and China pledged themselves to maintain peace and tranquility in the border areas pending a final resolution of the boundary question. This agreement enabled the two countries to pursue common interests in other areas. Recent border incidents have precipitated rethinking not only of our defence preparedness, trade and investment ties with China but also a broader shift in foreign policy toward closer cooperation with the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific area.

Zorawar Daulet Singh's *Power Shift* offers a comprehensive, up-to-date survey of the border issue, an analysis of the impact of changes in the global order on India-China relations and, finally, a set of policy recommendations. One does not have to agree with the author on every detail to recognise that this book is a timely, important and cogently argued contribution to the current policy debate. It deserves wide notice.

The book argues for an eventual settlement of the border question on the basis of the current status quo, with minor adjustments in both the western and eastern sectors. "The vital territorial interests of each side are satisfied by the present status quo," writes Daulet Singh. "What we have here are political claims and counter-claims, but neither side actually believes it can ever receive anything close to its official claims in a future settlement." India rejected Zhou Enlai's offer of a solution on these lines in 1960, partly because of its "inability to equate the dispute in the eastern and western sectors", despite its awareness that "India's own claim to Aksai Chin was ambiguous at best". The author reminds us that as late as in 1959, Nehru acknowledged: "It is a matter for argument which part [of Aksai Chin] belongs to us and which part belongs to somebody else. It is not clear."

Daulet Singh also notes that China's position has changed since 1985. Beijing now presses for major Indian concessions in the eastern sector, focusing on the Tawang area. Yet, he is hopeful other opportunities for a border settlement could emerge. In order to seize a future opportunity, he observes, the Indian body politic must be enlightened that "its original claims to Aksai Chin are not cast in stone". The author argues the case for a "deterrence-by-punishment strategy combined with robust holding capabilities" in order to face the Chinese challenge. This entails major improvements in logistics and connectivity, as well as strengthening our missile and air power capabilities to degrade targets deep inside Tibet. He makes a persuasive case against the "Mahanian delusion" that India can compensate for continental weakness by a naval capacity to challenge China's sea lines of communication.

On the diplomatic front, India should "formulate realpolitik policies that secure strategic interests without closing the door to cooperation and interdependence", writes Daulet Singh. A prudent policy would be to remain engaged with China while also building our comprehensive national power. Economic decoupling should be restricted to sectors where it can be justified by cost-benefit calculations. We should continue to pursue a multidirectional foreign policy, even as we avail ourselves of the opportunities offered by deepening tensions between the US and China.

India and China interact not only as nation-states but also as societies. *Beyond Pan-Asianism* is a collection of scholarly essays edited by Tansen Sen and Brian Tsui which aims to "demonstrate that instances of interaction outside formal diplomacy merit serious, critical examination". Some of the essays throw new light on familiar themes, such as Chinese evaluations of Tagore, while Sen contributes a meticulously researched chapter on 'Chinese Intrigue in Kalimpong', based on Indian intelligence reports concerning persons who were, or were suspected to be, Chinese spies. This book will be of considerable interest in academic circles because of the quality of its scholarship, even though the interactions between modern India and China at the societal level have been relatively modest, compared to India's interactions with many western or even middle eastern societies. ■

Chandrashekhar Dasgupta *is a former ambassador to China*

TRUTH HAS NO AGENDA. AND VICE VERSA.
TRUTH IS LOUDER.
INDIA TODAY GROUP
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This image is from the COVID-19 hospital coverage by the India Today Group.

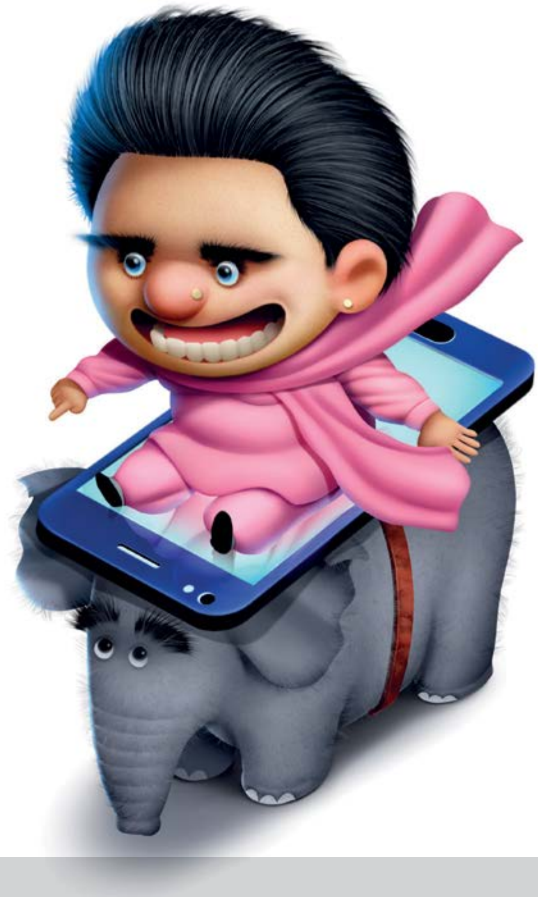


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

VIRAL AMBITION

Bahujan Samaj Party national president **Mayawati** seems to be warming to social media, shedding the aversion of days gone by when BSP workers were asked to stay off social media because Opposition parties, she felt, were using it to spread false information about her party. But now, with the 2022 Uttar Pradesh assembly election on their mind, the BSP is actively promoting the party and Behen*ji*'s message on Facebook and WhatsApp. Party leaders are even appealing to workers to save money to buy smartphones. Whether the BSP can make itself heard in the midst of the BJP's high-decibel social media bombardment is another question.

The Assam Divide

ANI

A low turnout at Prime Minister **Narendra Modi's** public meeting in Assam has left the BJP anxious. Only 50,000 people showed up on January 23 for the PM's function to distribute land allotment certificates to beneficiaries in Sivasagar in upper Assam. The party believes this to be the adverse impact of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, particularly in upper Assam, where Assamese-speaking people will play a key role in the forthcoming assembly election. But then, confoundingly for the state BJP, another public meeting, held by Union home minister Amit Shah, on January 24 in lower Assam attracted nearly 300,000 people, indicating little impact of CAA in that region.

ANI

REORGANISE OR PERISH

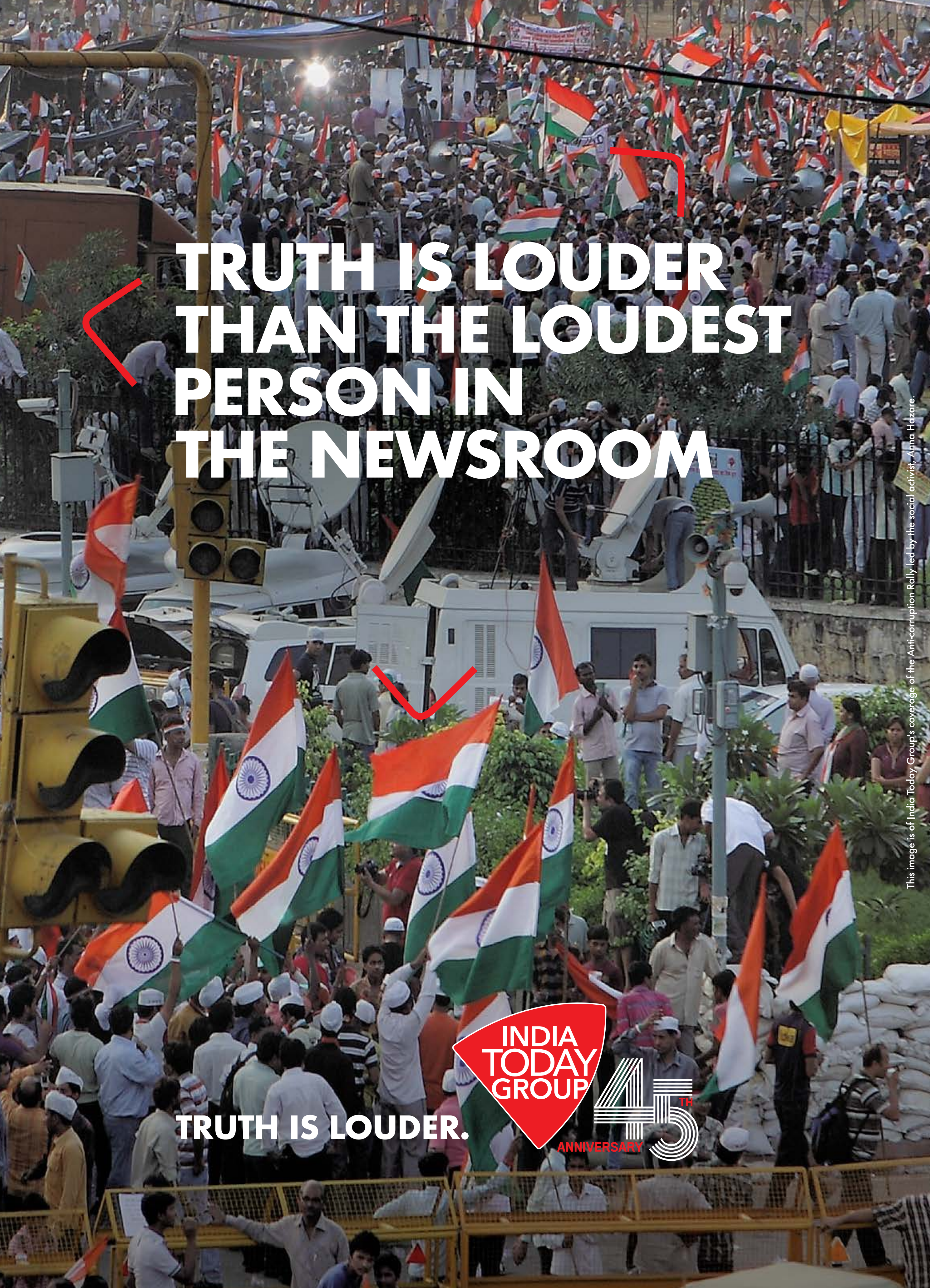
Telangana chief minister and Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) president **K. Chandrashekar Rao** (KCR) is eager to beat anti-incumbency and win his party a third term in 2022. The TRS is lobbying hard with the Centre to reorganise assembly constituencies and raise their numbers from 119 to 153. Delimitation of constituencies promised in the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, has been pending for six years. KCR's anxiety has deepened with the buzz about "one nation, one election" being ushered in by late 2022, barely a year ahead of the next Telangana assembly poll.

A Splash of Saffron

Last year, Maharashtra Navnirman Sena president **Raj Thackeray** had unveiled an all-saffron party flag, sparking speculation of an alliance with the BJP. This March, he is planning a trip to Ayodhya to visit the Ram temple. Looks like Raj is eyeing the north Indian voters settled in Mumbai, in his bid to stage a political comeback. Irony of ironies? The MNS was launched in 2006 on an anti-north Indian platform.

MILIND SHELTE

–Sandeep Unnithan with Ashish Misra, Kaushik Deka, Kiran D. Tare and Amarnath K. Menon


TRUTH IS LOUDER THAN THE LOUDEST PERSON IN THE NEWSROOM
TRUTH IS LOUDER.
INDIA TODAY GROUP
45TH ANNIVERSARY

This image is of India Today Group's coverage of the Anti-corruption Rally led by the social activist, Anna Hazare.

BATTLE FOR ASSAM

COMMUNAL CALCULATIONS

A CONSOLIDATION OF MUSLIM VOTES IN FAVOUR OF THE OPPOSITION ALLIANCE COULD BE A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR BUT THIS IS ONLY ONE OF SEVERAL POLARISING DYNAMICS AT PLAY AS THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN HEATS UP

BY KAUSHIK DEKA

THERE WAS JUBILATION IN the Opposition ranks last month when the Congress and Badruddin Ajmal's All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF)—along with the Left parties and the newly formed Anchalik Gana Morcha (AGM)—announced a grand alliance for the Assam assembly election. Though the Left drew a blank in the previous two assembly polls and the AGM is just a few months old, analysts feel the grand alliance holds the advantage in at least 46 of the 126 assembly seats, subject to one condition—a consolidation of the Muslim vote in its favour.

According to the 2011 Census, 35 per cent of Assam's population is Muslim, a higher proportion than in any other state. Unofficial estimates put this figure at over 40 per cent. A strong contender for their votes is the AIUDF, which was formed in 2005 on the plank of protecting Assam's immigrant Muslims, who are commonly stigmatised as illegal infiltrators from Bangladesh. The Congress, too, has traditionally banked on the support of Bangla-speaking Muslims. With their pre-poll alliance, the two parties are looking at preventing a division of the Muslim vote, which has benefited the ruling BJP-AGP (Asom Gana Parishad) alliance in several elections since 2014.

THE MUSLIM VOTER

The BJP leadership in Assam has already officially accepted that Muslims—particularly immigrants—are unlikely to vote for its alliance. "The 'Miya' Muslims (reference to Muslims of immigrant origin) do not vote for us, and we don't care for their votes [either]," says Himanta Biswa Sarma, Assam's finance and health minister. Muslim unity against the BJP was evident in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) elections held in December. The BJP dumped its former ally, the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), and joined hands with the new United People's Party Liberal (UPPL). Together, they won 21 of the 40 seats in the council. The BPF, though, held its ground, its tally of 17 only three seats less than the previous election. This is because while Bodo votes got split between the BPF and UPPL, Muslims, who have traditionally voted for the Congress and AIUDF, backed the BPF to prevent the BJP-UPPL from coming to power. They almost succeeded.

The BTC rules the Bodoland Territorial

১.০৬ লাখ হিতাধিকাৰী পৰিয়ালক মাটিৰ পট্টা আৰু আবণ্টন পত্ৰৰ জৰিয়তে ভূমিৰ অধিকাৰ প্ৰদান কৰিব

SAFFRON SHOW
PM Narendra Modi with Assam CM Sarbananda Sonowal at the distribution of land allotment certificates in Sivasagar, Jan. 23

ANI

Autonomous Districts (BTAD), which account for 12 assembly seats, all of which the BPF had won in 2016.

The Congress and AIUDF had contested the 2016 assembly election separately and won a total of 39 seats (26 and 13 seats, respectively). The BJP won 60 seats and the AGP 14. Both the Congress and AIUDF expect to do much better this time. Of the 33 Muslim-dominated seats, the Congress had won 17 in 2016 and the AIUDF 12. The BJP got the remaining four, both due to a split in the Muslim vote and consolidation among non-Muslims. These 33 seats are mostly in Lower Assam and the Barak Valley, where sentiment against immigrants from Bangladesh runs high. In seven of their 29 seats, the Congress and AIUDF had emerged victorious with less than 10 per cent of the total votes polled. In the upcoming assembly election, the alliance is betting on a consolidation among Muslim voters in Lower Assam and Barak Valley and the anti-BJP mood in parts of Upper Assam over the contentious

FRIENDS FOR VOTES

New alliances have emerged in the run-up to the Assam assembly election

BJP+AGP

The BJP's popularity is growing among non-Assamese-speaking Hindus, such as Bengalis, Biharis, Marwaris and Nepalese, and in the tea gardens areas whereas the AGP has a base among Assamese-speaking Hindus

Congress+ AIUDF+Left parties+

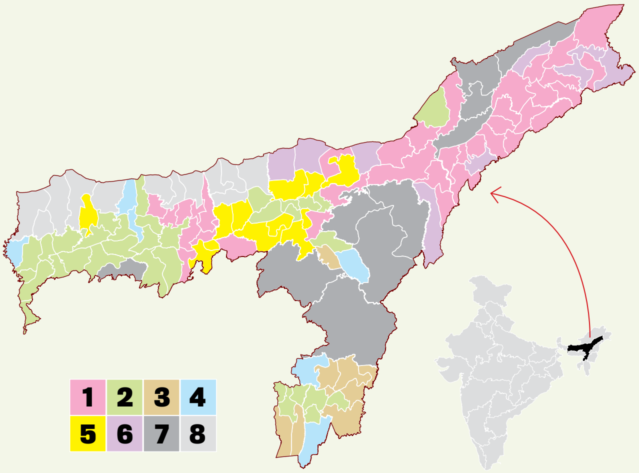
The alliance is hoping for a consolidation of the Muslim vote. The Congress expects to attract the anti-CAA voters swinging away from the BJP. The other parties in the alliance have little presence in the state

Asom Jatiya Parishad+ Raijor Dal

Both parties are hoping to gain from the anti-CAA movement in the state and consolidate the non-BJP, non-Congress votes under the umbrella of 'Assamese pride'

CAN MUSLIM CONSOLIDATION DEFEAT THE BJP?

The Congress-AIUDF alliance has an edge in at least 39 assembly seats in Assam, a state with 35 per cent Muslims. If Muslims vote en bloc, it could swing another 18 seats in favour of this alliance



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1. Seats where Assamese-speaking people play a decisive role

👎

Total seats **36**

22 10 4 0

9 2

While the CAA row is likely to do the BJP some damage, the anti-CAA votes may swing to new regional parties, further dividing the non-BJP vote. The Congress faces setbacks in these seats while the AIUDF has no presence here

2. Seats dominated by Muslims of immigrant origin

👍

Total seats **33**

4 0 17 12 4 7

Smart seat distribution can ensure a sweep for the Congress-AIUDF alliance

3. Seats dominated by Bengali Hindus

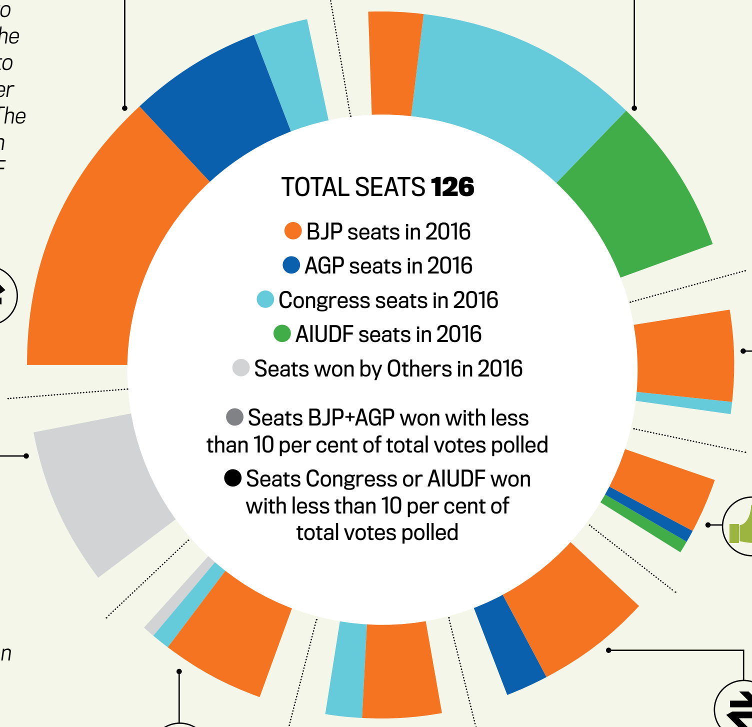
👎

Total seats **8**

7 0 1 0

3 0

The BJP stands to gain the most because of the support for CAA among these voters



4. Seats where communal polarisation will determine the result

👍

Total seats **6**

4 1 0 1

3 0

A well-managed alliance between the Congress and AIUDF could spell disaster for the BJP, but division in votes could swing results either way

8. BTAD* seats

⇄

Total seats **12**

0 0 0 0

12

0 0

The BPF won all 12 seats in 2016. This time, the newly formed UPPL and BJP will contest together against the BPF. On paper, the Congress-AIUDF alliance may gain because of division in Bodo votes while Muslim consolidation is a certainty

5. Swing seats with mixed population

⇄

Total seats **12**

9 3 0 0

3 0

The Congress-AIUDF alliance has the potential to reduce the BJP-AGP tally

7. Tribal-dominated seats

👎

Total seats **10**

8 0 1 0 1 3 1

BJP-AGP will gain; tribals, wary of the AIUDF coming to power, may vote against the Congress. The AIUDF has little base here

6. Constituencies where tea tribes and non-Assamese voters are likely to decide the winner

👎

Total seats **9**

6 0 3 0 0 2

The BJP has a tight grip on these seats; the AIUDF has no presence

**Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts*

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) to oust the BJP-AGP from power.

WILL CAA SWING IT?

The CAA provides a path to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, all Islamic countries. The Assamese-speaking population in Assam fears the law will primarily benefit illegal Bengali Hindu migrants from Bangladesh living in the state and change the linguistic demography in favour of Bangla speakers.

Anger over the CAA saw the birth of a new political outfit, the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP), last year. The AJP has formed an alliance with the Anchalik Dal, launched recently by incarcerated RTI activist Akhil Gogoi. The AJP has the backing of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), the influential student outfits that led the six-year-long agitation against illegal settlers. The agitation ended in 1985 with the Assam Accord between the Centre and the student groups. In the subsequent assembly poll, the newly formed AGP, comprising leaders from the AASU and AJYCP, rode to power.

To avoid a split in the anti-BJP vote, the Congress has been appealing to the AJP and Anchalik Dal to join its grand alliance, without success so far. In 2016, the Congress won four of the 36 assembly seats where Assamese-speaking people determine the verdict. The BJP-AGP won the remaining 32. In nine of these 32 seats, they polled less than 10 per cent of the votes. Now, the Congress is sensing an opportunity in these seats, thanks to the anti-CAA feelings among the Assamese-speaking electorate.

In its polarisation bid, the BJP is projecting immigrant Muslims as a 'threat' to Assam's natives. The aim is to gain the votes of Assamese-speaking people based on religious identity. While the Assam agitation against illegal infiltrators was indifferent to religion, the BJP has been partially successful in making it a Hindu vs. Muslim issue. For instance, some decisions of the Sarbananda Sonowal-led government, such as the closure of state-aided madrasas and refusal to set up a 'Miya museum', have found widespread public support. The BJP is hoping to capitalise on this and consolidate the Hindu vote.

Sarma's efficient handling of the Covid pandemic has helped the BJP neutralise some of the ire against CAA. The transparency introduced in recruitment for the state government has also earned the Sonowal government much goodwill. New welfare schemes and effective delivery of services have helped the party tighten its grip on the tea gardens, an erstwhile Congress stronghold.

The CAA is the reason many Congress leaders, particularly from Upper Assam and Barak Valley, were against the alliance with AIUDF. In Upper Assam, anti-CAA feelings among the Assamese-speaking people are likely to swing votes from the BJP to the Congress. But the alliance with AIUDF, Congress leaders fear, could also shift some of the anti-BJP vote to the regional parties. "In the eyes of the Assamese-speaking citizens, if the BJP is out to protect the interests of Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh, the Congress has joined hands with a party championing the cause of Muslim immigrants," says Vikas Tripathi, who teaches political science at Gauhati University. "The Congress should have approached the regional parties first for a pact and then the AIUDF."

Many in the Congress believe the pact with AIUDF gives the BJP an opportunity to project their party as anti-Assamese. Sarma has often said that Assam needs the CAA to prevent AIUDF chief Ajmal from becoming chief minister. He claims that citizenship for Bangladeshi Hindus will end the dominance of Muslims—and therefore the AIUDF—in 17 assembly seats.

In the Barak Valley, which has both Bangla-speaking Hindus and Muslims, the Hindu population supports CAA. Reason enough for top Congress leaders from the region, such as party women's wing chief Sushmita Dev, to refrain from speaking against the act.

The BJP's vital edge over the grand alliance is that it has a strong leadership to project in Sonowal-Sarma

TROUBLE IN THE ALLIANCE

Apart from how Muslims vote, a key determinant of the grand alliance's fortunes will be how its constituents iron out mutual problems. Seat distribution is a major point of friction between the Congress and AIUDF. The latter wants to contest 35 seats, primarily in Lower Assam and the Barak Valley, where there is a concentration of immigrant Muslims. The Congress is unlikely to accept the demand as this would mean a number of its sitting and former MLAs being denied tickets. This could prompt disgruntled Congress leaders to contest on their own, harming the party. The Congress's state leadership and AICC general secretary in-charge of Assam, Jitendra Singh, face the challenge of negotiating with an ambitious AIUDF chief and placating Congress aspirants who are asked to sit out the election. Sources say the AIUDF might even call off the alliance if the Congress strikes a hard bargain.

The BJP's vital edge over the grand alliance is that it has a strong leadership to project in Sonowal-Sarma. In contrast, the Congress is riddled with infighting. "This will impact the polls. Even the AJP has a face to project—party chief and former AASU leader Lurinjyoti Gogoi," says Tripathi. The absence of a credible chief ministerial face, demographic dynamics and social undercurrents are certain to make the grand alliance's electoral outing a difficult one. It will require deft political manoeuvring to translate what's achievable in theory into reality. ■

A BOLD NEW DEAL

The prime minister has bitten the bullet in Budget 2021 by spending big and giving a massive push to privatisation to fund his ambitious economic revival plans. Now he needs to ensure speedy delivery of his promises

By RAJ CHENGAPPA

THE SIMILARITIES ARE UNCANNY. In 1933, faced with the Great Depression that saw the American economy severely contract and unemployment soar from 4 per cent to 25 per cent, Franklin D. Roosevelt unveiled what he called the "New Deal" that focused on the 3Rs—relief for the poor and unemployed, recovery of the economy and reform of the financial system that had all but collapsed. Apart from an expansive monetary policy and injecting liquidity into the banking system, Roosevelt launched a major programme to build infrastructure, including roads, schools, dams, airports and hospitals, to provide jobs and income to unemployed millions.

Cut to India in 2021. A once-in-a-century pandemic devastated most of the world's economies and took its toll on India too. The country's GDP growth turned negative for the first time in 40 years and an estimated 122 million workers found themselves without jobs in the ensuing lockdown. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had four examples of how his predecessors, when confronted with a negative GDP growth rate in the past—in 1958, 1966, 1973 and 1980—chose to play it safe and desisted from introducing new policy initiatives. Though, to be fair to them, the havoc on the economy then was not as bad as it is now. The imperatives for the prime minister and finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman were similar to the ones Roosevelt faced. So, Modi decided to use Budget 2021 to present a bold new deal that would, as he put it, "spur both wellness and wealth". Tarun Bajaj, economic affairs secretary and one of the key officials involved in preparing the budget, said, "The prime minister and the finance minister told us to be aggressive, play on the front foot and go for growth. So we did just that."

WHAT'S NEW ABOUT IT?

The prime minister's current approach to economic reform is radically different from that in his first term. Despite his massive development agenda, he was considered an incremental reformer and a fiscally conservative gradualist. But emboldened by a decisive re-election that saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) return with a full majority in Parliament, Modi 2.0 went for a flurry of big-bang reforms. The prime minister first stepped hard on the pedal to fulfil the Sangh Parivar's agenda. This included abolishing Article 370, fast-tracking the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and passing the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Modi then wowed big business by significantly reducing corporate tax rates even as he announced a massive programme to provide piped drinking water to all rural households by 2024. He also set an ambitious target of doubling the size of the economy to $5 trillion by 2024 and opened up several sectors to foreign investment. However, Budget 2020 flattered to deceive, with Modi resorting to fiscal prudence, signalling that his efforts to revive the economy would not be at the expense of equitable growth.

The pandemic saw a sea change in the prime minister's approach. Dr P.K. Mishra, his principal secretary, says, "Earlier, we had worked towards a macroeconomic balance that planned for a tolerable debt by keeping the fiscal deficit low. But the pandemic was a Black Swan event that required unconventional thinking and action on all key issues, including the fiscal deficit. It was an extraordinary event that required unusual decisions." Sitharaman was told to open the coffers to provide several doses of stimulus under the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan (Self-Reliant India campaign) that amounted overall to 15 per cent of the GDP (including a monetary stimulus by the RBI). Apart from providing free grain and pulses to the poor, there was a provision to put money in the hands of women and farmers, and loan moratoriums for the MSME (micro, small and medium enterprise) sector.

Simultaneously, the finance minister announced a raft of reforms to spur investments in eight major sectors, including relaxing FDI limits in defence, privatising six more airports, opening up coal mining to the private sector and in space and atomic agencies. She also declared that the government would come out with a policy to divest all its public sector enterprises, except in a few vital sectors. Meanwhile, the government rammed through a bill in Parliament to radically alter agriculture laws with the promise of ushering in Green Revolution 2.0. This was an all-new Modi in full throttle who believed that the adversity caused by the pandemic was an opportunity to usher in major long-pending reforms across key sectors. In Budget 2021, he gets even bolder in his mission.

> **"The PM and FM," says economic affairs secretary Tarun Bajaj, "told us to be aggressive, play on the front foot and go for growth. So we did just that"**

WHAT'S BOLD ABOUT IT?

For one, Modi is now willing to spend big even if it breaches all previous fiscal norms. "In the first term, whenever we planned to break the fiscal deficit norm, we were ambushed into not doing so by various groups and the PM told us to keep it under check," a senior official who worked in the PMO admits. But the pandemic provided the rationale to go ahead and spend and, as Sitharaman put it, "we have spent, we have spent, and we have spent". All that spending saw the fiscal deficit balloon from 3.5 per cent to an estimated 9.5 per cent for FY2020-21. Having fulfilled the Sangh Parivar's agenda early in his second term, Modi had strengthened his ability to proceed with reforms that he wanted to carry out despite reservations from some quarters within the fold. As an official who worked on the budget put it, "We thought there will be resistance from the political executive but we found that they were four steps ahead of us on reforms and we had to play catch-up."

While overall expenditure for Budget 2021 is expected to go up marginally, a whopping Rs 5.54 lakh crore has been set aside for capital expenditure, the largest in recent times and 34 per cent more than the previous year. As in Roosevelt's New Deal, the focus is on spending big on infrastructure with huge amounts of money being set aside for building roads, highways, rail networks, health centres, housing and water supply apart from defence and education (*see accompanying reports*), with one eye, of course, on poll-bound states, where many of the projects have been announced. All this spending means that the fiscal deficit will continue to be a high 6.8 per cent for FY21-22 with a glide path to bring it down to 4.5 per cent by FY25-26.

But the budget gets even bolder with a big push for privatisation to bankroll its massive economic revival plan. Vinayak Chatterjee, chairman, Feedback Infra, says, "The budget drums up massive public expenditure for infrastructure to kickstart the economy and bankrolls the plans with options such as monetisation and disinvestment of government assets." Sitharaman in her budget has announced that FDI limits for the insurance sector are being raised from 49 per cent to 74 per cent—a major reform—and that two public sector banks and an insurance company will be privatised. While her predecessor Arun Jaitley is regarded as one who saw the big picture, officials say that Sitharaman has considerable eye for detail.

In her budget, the finance minister laid down the roadmap for a total overhaul of public sector enterprises with an overview of the privatisation policy. Under it, PSEs, banks and insurance companies will be clustered into four strategic areas—atomic energy, space and defence; transport and telecom; power, petroleum, coal and other minerals; and banking, insurance and financial services—in which the government plans to have a limited presence. In all other areas, the PSEs would either be privatised or sold. Sitharaman also set a disinvestment target of Rs 1.75 lakh crore for FY21-22. Mishra calls it "a coherent and cred-

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

^ **MAKING A STATEMENT**
Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman with the budget document

ible policy towards privatisation and one that fits in with the prime minister's promise of minimum government and maximum governance".

Overall, Gopal Krishna Agarwal, BJP's national spokesperson, thinks that the budget is in line with the party's ideological foundation of being right of centre in which the market economy and the business community play a big role in the economic development of the country. "Whether you look at reforms in labour and agriculture or disinvestment of public sector units, these are coming from the core convictions of the party," he says. The reforms, however, have raised a howl of protests from two major Sangh Parivar constituents, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM) and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, with both releasing statements asking the government to roll back some of it privatisation plans.

Some experts complain that the budget fails to provide relief to those who suffered the most because of the pandemic, particularly migrant labour, and that the government should have provisioned for monetary support in the form of doles. Such schemes were, in fact, discussed both at the PMO and the finance ministry but not approved because, as Mishra says, "We had made some direct transfers earlier, but we felt if we spent more money on capital investment, it would have a multiplier effect leading to more growth and jobs." The budget has also taken other important steps such as setting up a bad bank to reform India's ailing financial sector. Concerns remain, though, on the budget's ability to deliver on its promises and bring about economic revival.

WILL THE DEAL WORK?

"The devil lies in its implementation," says Bajaj. He is right. The road to privatisation is full of potholes that have hobbled many such efforts in the past. Even before Covid-19 played spoilsport, the government's disinvestment always fell woefully short of the target. Plans to privatise Air India announced three years ago continue to languish. Efforts to disinvest from IDBI, another PSU, were initiated at the beginning of the Modi government's first term but are yet to fructify. The SJM had always opposed the outright sale of PSUs and has pushed for the equity route. But the experience so far, say finance ministry officials,has been that it ends up devaluing the asset and is not a solution. Privatisation of certain functions of the railways has also met with delays and losses, making private players chary of investing in it. Chatterjee points out that in the highway sector, the public-private partnership (PPP) model for such projects has run into huge roadblocks, resulting in investors considering them only for operations and maintenance and not for their construction. So, the real concern is that despite the big announcements, getting privatisation off the ground will be a long-drawn-out affair. Most major Indian companies are already overleveraged in terms of debt and may not have the stomach to negotiate the maze of complexities.

With the government using Aatmanirbhar Bharat as the superstructure for its economic revival and announcing that it would be revising all customs duties and tariffs, there is real concern that India is becoming protectionist again as it was before the 1991 reform. Few countries have experienced rapid economic growth without a major export push. With exports having plateaued in the past five years and with India shying away from signing major trade deals, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the worry is that despite the government's tall talk of becoming part of the global value chain, we may end up becoming more insular and our industries turning inefficient and uncompetitive as a result. It is important that the government maintain transparency and go out and sell the reforms announced to the public lest they attract opposition in the same way the new agriculture laws are seeing protests by farmers.

While the government needed to breach fiscal deficit norms to overcome the debilitating impact of the pandemic, disaster awaits if it fails to scale it down to the levels planned in the next couple of years. With the country steeped in debt, it could see inflation rise and create economic instability that Modi and his team may find difficult to control. The prime minister is aware that even before the pandemic, the average economic growth in his first term was lower than in the previous dispensation which he had mocked. The pandemic has only exacerbated the problem. If Modi has to leave a legacy of being a great reformist, then he has to ensure that the measures he has put in place lead to high economic growth in the next three years. That is a tough ask. ■

THE MANTRA OF PRIVATISATION

The 2021-22 budget signals the government's intent to disinvest like "never before". But if that's the new model for economic recovery, it's easier said

By SHWWETA PUNJ, ANILESH S. MAHAJAN AND M.G. ARUN

WHEN THE NARENDRA MODI GOVERNMENT came to power in 2014, one of its more memorable slogans was 'minimum government, maximum governance', a pledge to reduce the size and business footprint of government. In one area in particular, it has little to show on this count: the divestment of PSUs (public sector undertakings). Though it has regularly set ambitious revenue targets—totalling Rs 6.57 lakh crore since 2014-15—it has fallen short year after year, achieving Rs 4.04 lakh crore as of 2020-21. The figures for this past fiscal year were particularly bad, with disinvestment revenues of Rs 31,000 crore against a target of Rs 2.1 lakh crore.

Nevertheless, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's 2021-22 budget reiterates this commitment. Also, given that the outlook for both economic buoyancy and tax revenues remains subdued, the government is hoping to use the proceeds of big-ticket disinvestment to bankroll the next phase of economic recovery. In this effort, the Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM) will play a key role. Its job is to make a few hundred PSUs lined up for divestment look attractive to investors. DIPAM has its task cut out, given the government's reliance on non-tax resources. Making a virtue of that necessity, Ajay Bhushan Pandey, finance secretary and one of the chief architects of the budget, says: "The question was whether to follow an incremental approach or make a quantum leap. This budget is about a quantum leap into the future. The plan is to monetise [public sector] assets; the government

Photo illustration by BANDEEP SINGH

should only be a facilitator."

"India is in a position where it must be less sentimental about PSU sales," says Tuhin Kanta Pandey, DIPAM secretary, the man in charge of pushing the divestment agenda. "This will require dynamism from the private sector—we want more people to compete." This no doubt refers to the private sector's lukewarm response to the Modi government's disinvestment programmes so far. Noting how crucial PSU sales are in the current context, MP and chairperson of the standing committee on finance, Jayant Sinha, says, "This is a defining moment for disinvestment and privatisation of public assets."

SALES TARGET FOR THE YEAR

For 2021-22, the Centre has targeted Rs 1.75 lakh crore in revenue from disinvestment, privatisation and asset monetisation. However, in the past two years, its efforts in this direction have moved slowly—for instance, the Centre has already extended the disinvestment deadline for BPCL (Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited) several times. Similarly, it was only after several deadline extensions that the government received bids for its stake sale in Air India.

The finance minister has said that the disinvestment of these companies and others, including the Shipping Corporation of India, the Container Corporation of India, IDBI Bank, Bharat Earth Movers Limited, Pawan Hans and Neelachal Ispat Nigam, would be completed in 2021-22. In addition to these, the government says it will take up the privatisation of two public sector banks and one general insurance company in 2021-22, with the legislative amendments for these being introduced in the current session of Parliament. The government has also said that it will maintain a presence in a handful of strategic sectors—these include atomic energy, space and defence, transport and telecommunications, power, petroleum, coal and other minerals and banking, insurance and financial services. The NITI Aayog will be tasked with drawing up a list of other PSUs for the next round of divestment efforts.

In this, the Modi government has a fine template it could follow—the divestment measures taken by the BJP government under then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. That government was known for its aggressive push for privatisation of CPSEs (central public sector enterprises) between 1998 and 1999-2004. For instance, the Vajpayee government had formed a department of disinvestment in 1999, which became a ministry in 2001, with Arun Shourie as the first disinvestment minister. Under Shourie's watch, a host of CPSEs were privatised, including telecom player VSNL, Centaur Hotels, Hindustan Zinc and Maruti Udyog. These efforts saw the Vajpayee government raising Rs 36,960 crore from 1998 to 2004. However, these were not without controversy—even after nearly two decades, Shourie is still haunted by a case filed against him alleging irregularities in the sale of a government-owned hotel in Udaipur.

THE NAYSAYERS

Some argue that the disinvestment process should not lead to the government selling profitable enterprises, only those that need a change in management to become profitable. "Public sector banks, whatever their weaknesses, are the pivot around which a number of programmes are evolved and implemented," P. Chidambaram, Congress leader and former finance minister, said in a press meet. "The answer is not wholesale privatisation."

ON THE BLOCK

The Centre has begun with a few PSUs, and says the disinvestment process will be wrapped up in the next financial year

BPCL

INCOME (FY20)
₹2,87,650 CRORE

PAT
₹2,683 CRORE

AIR INDIA

INCOME (FY19)
₹26,430 CRORE

PAT
₹-8,474 CRORE

PAWAN HANS
VT-PWG

PAWAN HANS

INCOME (FY19)
₹2,023.6 CRORE

PAT
₹-402.2 CRORE

SHIPPING CORPORATION OF INDIA

INCOME (FY20)
₹4,677 CRORE

PAT
₹302 CRORE

beml
BE1800E

BEML

INCOME (FY20)
₹3,108 CRORE

PAT
₹68 CRORE

eLounge
Banking 24 X 7
IDBI BANK

IDBI BANK

INCOME (FY20)
₹25,295 CRORE

PAT
₹-12,887 CRORE

PAT: Profit after tax

Others say the Centre's announcements should be taken with a pinch of salt. "The government has not been very aggressive on the divestment front so far," says D.K. Joshi, chief economist with Crisil. "It may be able to carry out its plans this year, since it has already made preparations for some of these sales earlier." What will be crucial is how the government implements its divestment programme in the wake of likely protests from the Opposition and trade unions. "It is a big step provided it gets done. Implementation is the elephant in the room," emphasises Joshi.

The government will also have to contend with opposition from within the ruling alliance and its affiliates. For example, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), a group affiliated to the RSS, was quick to criticise the disinvestment programme, saying that "the mixing of the beautiful concept of Atmanirbhar Bharat with FDI (foreign direct investment) and disinvestment in the Union budget is disappointing for employees". Beginning February 12, the BMS will be holding a three-day meeting of its national executive council in Chennai, and will decide then on how to oppose these budget proposals.

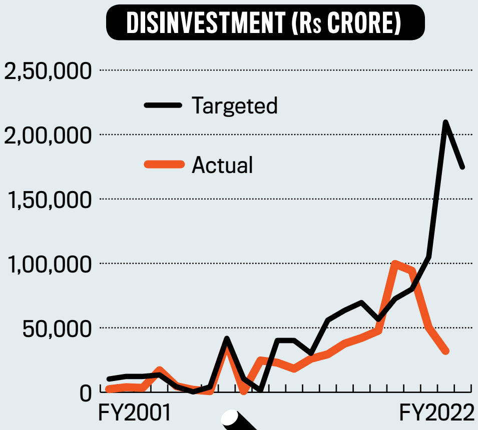
Similarly, the RSS and the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM), the RSS's umbrella organisation of affiliates in the economic sphere, have a long history of vehemently opposing proposals for disinvestment and enhanced FDI. In fact, they still remain critical of former finance minister Yashwant Sinha and Shourie. One specific issue is the raising of FDI limits. "We are not against privatisation or FDI, but there has to be a tangible reason [for these]," says Ashwani Mahajan, national co-convenor of the SJM. He adds that there is a need for a national debate on how the government intends to carry out its disinvestment programme and a clear explanation of how FDI will benefit consumers. "We have already told [the Centre] there is no need for strategic disinvestment in PSUs like BPCL, Shipping Corporation or Air India," he says, saying that BPCL is a profit-making enterprise. He adds that such assets should be divested in the stock market and should be run by professional management, and that public sector banks should be dealt with in the same way. "In the past year, two private sector banks have collapsed," he points out, arguing against the idea that privatisation always brings good management.

Many RSS leaders are also not in favour of large-scale privatisation. "We understand that the government has no business being in business," says a top leader, asking to remain anonymous. "Excessive bureaucracy also leads to corporations not performing up to their potential and often leads to corruption. [However], disinvestment and asset monetisation require not only caution, but also across-the-board consultations." Satish Marathe, an RSS ideologue and part of the RBI's board, argues that there is need to reform the management and operational structure of public sector banks, not their ownership.

Although BJP chief J.P. Nadda has hailed the Union budget as one for an 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat', several top party leaders, speaking on condition of anonymity, say that while privatisation, asset monetisation and private capital may be good economics, they are very hard to sell politi-

THE DISINVESTMENT MIRAGE

Successive governments in the past two decades have slipped on disinvestment targets, underlining the challenges of the process



"India is now in a position where we must be **less sentimental about public sector undertaking asset sales**"

—Tuhin Kanta Pandey, *Secretary, DIPAM*

THE VAJPAYEE MODEL

The A.B. Vajpayee government left a mark on the disinvestment map with its push to privatise central public sector enterprises (CPSEs) during its terms (1998-1999 and 1999-2004)

₹36,960 CRORE

Revenues from CPSE disinvestment in 1998-2004

MARCH 1998

A.B. Vajpayee becomes prime minister

DECEMBER 1999

Department of disinvestment set up

FEBRUARY 2001 →

Centre approves sale of Balco (Bharat Aluminium Co.) to Sterlite Industries controlled by Anil Agarwal

> “Our policy provides a clear roadmap for disinvestment. **In strategic sectors, the bare minimum of firms will be maintained”**
>
> **—Nirmala Sitharaman,** *Finance Minister*

cally. “Most experts would argue that the recent farm sector reforms are good plans that are well intended and would benefit farmers,” points out a leader. “Yet we are finding it difficult to sell this idea to those who would benefit from it.” There is a general sense among the BJP cadre that there is a huge gap in communicating the benefits of these proposals to those who matter. “Privatisation and asset monetisation have the potential to create a negative narrative,” says the leader, “that everything is for sale, that the country is for sale.”

A FOCUSED APPROACH

Analysts describe the new model of growth—monetising government assets worth lakhs of crores of rupees, reducing government presence in business and building assets—as Keynesian, focusing on boosting demand via infrastructure rather than through doles. Parallels are being drawn to the UK of the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher, which instituted a massive privatisation drive to spur economic growth.

Sources say that every detail of the Centre’s PSE (public sector enterprise) policy has been vetted by the PMO (prime minister’s office), and that it will be closely monitoring the implementation. The process of putting up stake sales in PSUs includes a multi-tier approval process, involving several committees, including one headed by the cabinet secretary and another comprising a group of ministers with cabinet powers. Tuhin Pandey says that decisions will be taken on a project-to-project basis, because each CPSE divestment will pose unique challenges. And as the Centre looks to attract investors, it will have to focus on the details that it clearly missed during the Air India disinvestment process—such as who takes over sovereign guarantees, or who pays for the voluntary retirement schemes and so on. A former minister who has worked closely on divestment suggests that the government ought to consider listing PSUs chosen for disinvestment on the stock markets to improve price discovery. However, Pandey points out that there aren’t too many PSUs left that would be attractive to investors and are large enough on the bourses.

There are also several soft skills that government functionaries will need to develop to deal with bankers and investors. “The reward is in selling the company at the best price, but the government invites just about anyone to apply for request for proposal,” says an investment advisor who has worked with the government. “Investment bankers are asked to make presentations that would take 45 minutes in 15 minutes, and

SEPTEMBER 2001

Department of disinvestment renamed ministry of disinvestment; Arun Shourie becomes first disinvestment minister

FEBRUARY 2002 ↑

Tata acquires controlling stake in VSNL (Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited)

MARCH-APRIL 2002 ↓

Hotels Airport Centaur and Juhu Centaur in Mumbai acquired by Batra Hospitality and Tulip Hospitality, respectively

APRIL 2002

Government divests share in Hindustan Zinc to Sterlite Industries

MAY 2002

Disinvestment of Maruti Udyog approved, Japan’s Suzuki Motor Corp takes the driver’s seat

JUNE 2002

Government divests stake in IPCL (Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited) in favour of Reliance Industries

QAMAR SIBTAIN

^ OVERLOADED INFRA
A heavy crowd at Noli Railway Station in Ghaziabad, National Capital Region

the honorarium that's paid is just one rupee!" In another instance, a fund manager recounts an experience in 2013 when one of India's largest banks conducted a road show in London. At a meeting with the managers of a leading UK-based fund, bank officials spent nearly 45 minutes talking about the history of the bank, leaving no time for discussions on critical aspects like the bank's non-performing assets (NPAs or bad loans).

There is also a need for a radical shift in mindset and the empowerment of officers to allow speedy resolution of issues. Pandey also talks about litigation hurting disinvestment agendas—for instance, the BPCL privatisation move saw several court cases piling up on issues like wage settlement and an employee stock purchase scheme ahead of the planned disinvestment. Other countries roll out the red carpet for investors; in India, investors are left to fend for themselves. This includes superficially trivial issues like investors having to wait extended periods outside government ministries for passes to go inside, which tends to dampen their interest in making a deal.

TWO AIMS, ONE PLAN

Another major announcement in the budget relates to the Centre's 'national monetisation pipeline' to monetise public infrastructure assets in railways, highways and infrastructure. As Vinayak Chatterjee, chairman of Feedback Infra, says, "The budget is like a *jugalbandi*, with two hands playing the *tabla*. One hand is focused on roads, infrastructure and public works, while the other is focused on asset monetisation." Two major sectors in which this *jugalbandi*

IDEAS FOR PRIVATE CAPITAL

RAILWAYS

PROPOSAL

Monetisation of Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFCs). The projects are expected to be commissioned by June 2022

CHALLENGES

➘Requires an independent regulator to ensure fair play for private investors
➘Cross subsidy of passenger fares with freight tariff needs to be reduced
➘Railways needs to be leaner, with operations, regulations and policy-making segregated

POWER

PROPOSAL

Competition among discoms (distribution companies)

CHALLENGES

➘Needs amendments to Electricity Act, 2003
➘Discoms need to segregate their content and carriage
➘Discoms are a state subject. Central governments have had limited success in disciplining them
➘Discoms' cumulative losses is Rs 4.5 lakh cr

is visible is railways and energy.

On this count, finance minister Sitharaman talked about asset monetisation of the Railways' in-development DFCs (Dedicated Freight Corridors) as part of the reform of the Indian Railways. Apart from allowing private players to own and operate freight trains, the Railways has also asked its subsidiary, RailTel, to look for ways to monetise the 2,800-km-long optical fibre running alongside the DFCs.

In her budget speech, finance minister Sitharaman talked about the Indian Railways' 'mission 2030', which would involve infrastructure upgrades and improved facilities for consumers. This would require investments of over Rs 50 lakh crore over the next decade. This year, Sitharaman has allocated Rs 1.1 lakh crore to the Railways, 57 per cent more than last year's allocation of Rs 70,000 crore. Apart from completing existing projects, this money will be spent on track electrification and expanding the railway network in northeastern states and in J&K. The budget also announced the commencement of work on new DFCs connecting West Bengal's Kharagpur with Andhra Pradesh's Vijayawada via a 1,115-km-long east-coast corridor, and a 935 km route connecting the port at Vijayawada with Nagpur (Maharashtra) and Itarsi (Madhya Pradesh). If private players show enough interest in existing DFCs, the same template can be replicated for these projects.

Last year, the Union cabinet also rolled out a plan to add 151 private trains on 109 routes over the next seven years. If all goes well, the first batch of 12 private trains will begin operations by March 2023. These trains will directly compete with the 2,800 express and mail trains run by the Indian Railways. However, to monetise assets and to allow private trains to ferry freight as well as passengers, the Railways requires the appointment of a regulator. The lack of such an authority has already left some early private entrants to the field with a bitter taste and remains a major hurdle for new investors. For example, in 2006, when the then railways minister Lalu Prasad Yadav opened up freight transport to the private sector, 16 private players entered with a cumulative investment of around Rs 6,000 crore. Data from the association of container train operators shows that as of end-2020, they had suffered losses of about Rs 700 crore. Operators cite the doubling of haulage charges, which make up 60-70 per cent of their operating costs, in the past 14 years as the main reason for losses. What makes matters worse is that private players have no authority to challenge such charge escalations.

Nonetheless, the appointment of a regulator is politically sensitive, and it will have to deal with several legacy issues. For instance, the passenger transport business is a loss-making vertical for the Indian Railways—on average, it meets about 57 per cent of its operational costs through the sale of passenger tickets, with the rest being cross-subsidised through earnings from freight. A regulator will have to cut down on cross subsidies, which would mean either an increase in passenger fares or the exchequer bearing the burden of the subsidies. That said, there are potential knock-on benefits to the entry of private players, like an increased demand for rolling stock (locomotives, coaches, etc) as private firms develop their own railway stables. A more corporate-friendly structure will not only help to bring in private players and capital, but is also expected to help the railways upgrade its technology.

> **"The question was whether to follow an incremental approach or make a quantum leap. This budget is a statement of a quantum leap into the future"**
>
> **—Ajay Bhushan Pandey,** *Finance Secretary*

In the last week of January, a week before the finance minister announced the Centre's intent to monetise energy infrastructure such as transmission lines and oil and gas pipelines, state-promoted transmission company Power Grid filed draft IPO (initial public offering) papers for its first infrastructure trust, the first time a public sector enterprise has used such a vehicle to monetise assets. It is expected that the trust will raise up to Rs 4,995 crore through the IPO, while its sponsor Power Grid also plans to sell units worth up to Rs 3,000 crore through it, taking the total expected revenue to almost Rs 8,000 crore. The government expects to use the money raised out of asset monetisation to fund Power Grid's existing network expansion plans.

The good news for the private players in transmission as well as in renewable energy relates to development finance institutions (DFIs). If successfully implemented, DFIs will cut down the dependency of these players on banks and the corporate bond market for funding. Meanwhile, the successful implementation of the soon-to-be-launched Atal Distribution System Improvement Yojana, aimed at assisting discoms (distribution companies) in infrastructure creation would also make the life of private players—if they decide to enter the sector—much easier.

To make privatisation a success—India will have to rethink how it sells. It will have to deck up its halls and welcome the investor. It will need to empower and incentivise those who will make it happen—the management and the bankers. Above all, it needs to take all stakeholders along and not allow things to get into a stalemate as we have seen in the case of the new farm laws. ■

MINISTRY OF FINANCE

RAJWANT RAWAT

TIGHTROPE WALK

With limited resources on one side and burgeoning expenditure on the other, the Centre had to be realistic, bring in transparency and alter the spending mix

By M.G. Arun and Shwweta Punj

THE HAVOC WREAKED BY COVID-19 CALLED FOR EXCEPTIONAL policy measures, and at least the "never-before" rhetoric before the Union budget was in step with the high expectations. The hope was that the government would spend big, not just on healthcare, the most immediate and urgent priority, but also on infrastructure, as the main engine of economic growth and employment. Sectors that have been hit the worst, such as most services, manufacturers of 'non-essential goods' and MSMEs, to name just a few, were also looking for succour.

But the high-decibel announcements and headlines notwithstanding, what comes out on a close reading of the budget is an admission by government of the severe revenue constraints it faces. Constraints that make spending difficult without resorting to high borrowings and non-tax modes of revenues such as disinvestment. In that sense, it is a realistic budget which acknowledges the meagre resources currently in hand. Also, in a departure from recent behaviour, it has kept the big headline numbers—such as the GDP and the fiscal deficit—honest in this Budget.

Covid-19 has impacted not just lives and livelihoods but also thrown all fiscal calculations into disarray. As revenues slipped and unforeseen expenses ballooned, the fiscal deficit (government expenditure minus revenues) slipped badly, growing almost three times to around 9.5 per cent of GDP, from 3.5 per cent budgeted earlier. Revenues under all three heads—tax, non-tax and non-debt capital—fell short in fiscal 2020-21 compared to budgeted targets. The government met this shortfall through massive borrowings from the market and other sources. Borrowings more than doubled from Rs 7.96 lakh crore (budgeted) to Rs 18.5 lakh crore (revised) in FY21.

In a first, the equity markets

TREADING A FINE LINE

That the fiscal deficit would be compromised was a given, considering the pandemic and the calamitous events it set off. How has the government handled it so far?

Source: Ministry of finance, CRISIL

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मंत्रालय
GOVT. OF INDIA
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^ **LONG ROAD AHEAD**
FM Nirmala Sitharaman arrives at the ministry on budget day, Feb. 1

6.8% Fiscal deficit target for 2021-22

soared 2,500 points even as the government put out a fiscal deficit number higher than nearly all estimates. "The central government has shown the rating agencies that it will do fiscal prudence on its own terms," says Nilesh Shah, MD, Kotak Mahindra Asset Management Company. "Off-budget items were running into lakhs of crores of rupees. It takes heart to show a 9.5 per cent (fiscal deficit)," he adds.

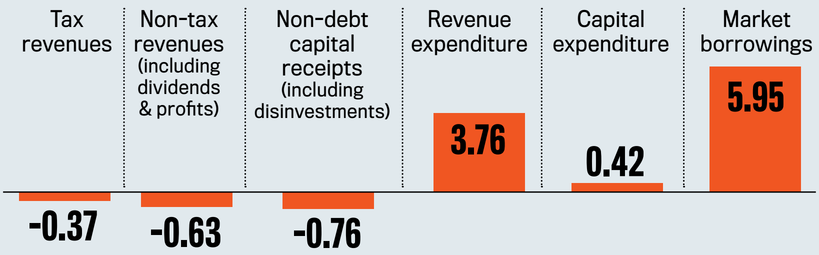
FISCAL DEFICIT SLIPS

In fact, the budget has set a realistic fiscal deficit target for FY2021-22 as well. At 6.8 per cent of GDP, it indicates that the government is committed to public expenditure far in excess of its revenue expectations. Which, broadly speaking, is what the doctors ordered. Several economists have advised that the government shed its conservative stance with regard to the fiscal deficit, and allow it to slip in the range of 6-7 per cent of GDP (which would release an estimated Rs 14 lakh crore into the economy) to push growth. But it is not a reckless exercise. The budget has set a glide path to reduce the fiscal deficit to 4.5 per cent of GDP by 2025-26, which gives the government leeway to maintain the high spending till the next general election. But it is also a grim reminder that the government's finances will be in disarray over the next few years. Since the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act requires India to keep the fiscal deficit at 3 per cent, Sitharaman said the act will now be amended taking in the new realities.

So, how tough was it to make this choice? As the pandemic spread across the world, the Indian government sought advice from all quarters on the best practices in health and economic management. But it soon realised that nearly everybody was

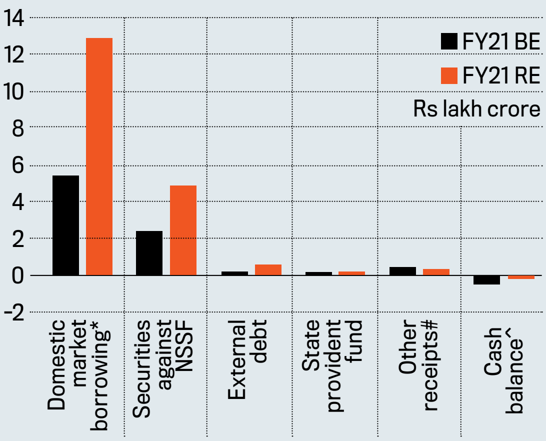
HOW AND WHY FISCAL DEFICIT WENT FOR A TOSS

Revised estimates minus budget estimates, FY21 (% of GDP)



BORROWINGS FROM MAJOR SOURCES MORE THAN DOUBLED IN FY21

FINANCING OF FISCAL DEFICIT



*includes borrowings through G-Secs and T-bills; #includes net receipts from internal debt and public account and PO Life Insurance Fund; ^decrease/ increase

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

₹34.8 LAKH CRORE Total budgetary expenditure for 2021-22

navigating in the dark. That's when the government decided to follow what's referred to as the 'barbell strategy' in finance—hedging for the worst outcome while updating one's information at every step. "Our response was oriented towards radical uncertainty," explains Sanjeev Sanyal, principal economic advisor to the government. There were countries that opted for a grand stimulus, but the government decided not to go down that road. "We constantly got advice that we needed to announce this large stimulus but we said 'no'. There's no point in pressing the accelerator with your foot on the brake. We cushioned the system and kept it in deep freeze," he adds. Sanyal says the government created the world's largest food programme, kept the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code in abeyance, and guaranteed loans to MSMEs. "We just kept the system going," he explains.

BUILDING TRANSPARENCY

As mentioned earlier, the higher fiscal deficit numbers are also the result of some transparency in accounting. The budget relies less on off-budget items for funding investments and more on capex allocations. For instance, the budget has put an end to the practice of funding Food Corporation of India's (FCI) shortfall via borrowings from the National Small Savings Fund and replaced it with budgetary allocations. The revised figure for FCI borrowing, Rs 4,22,618 crore, is way above the budgeted figure of Rs 1,15,570 crore in 2020-21. This is one reason why the revised estimates for 2020-21 have ballooned to Rs 34.5 lakh crore, from the budget estimates of Rs 30.4 lakh crore. Likewise, the revised estimate for fertiliser subsidy, Rs 1,33,947 crore, is way higher than the budget estimate of Rs 71,309 crore, adding to the fiscal deficit. "Our approach on fiscal management has been of transparency; window dressing wouldn't have been acceptable. We have spent more and collected less revenue," admits finance secretary Ajay Bhushan Pandey.

AFP

^ **STOCK SERVICES** A digital screen on the BSE building facade in Mumbai relays the budget speech live, February 1

There was a contraction in tax revenues but high expenditure was unavoidable in view of the pandemic. "When you start segregating the fiscal deficit, you can see the money is being spent on infrastructure," says Atanu Chakraborty, former economic affairs secretary. For the past few decades, capital expenditure, which involves the spending on physical assets such as infrastructure and power projects, has been increasing by 20-25 per cent, but now the ramp-up is nearly 35 per cent (compared to the budgeted capital expenditure for 2020-21), he says. "For sustained growth, we have to continue this for a while," Chakraborty adds.

THE RAMP-UP IN CAPITAL EXPENDITURE IS NOW NEARLY 35% COMPARED TO THE PREVIOUS BUDGET, A MOVE THAT IS EXPECTED TO BOLSTER GROWTH

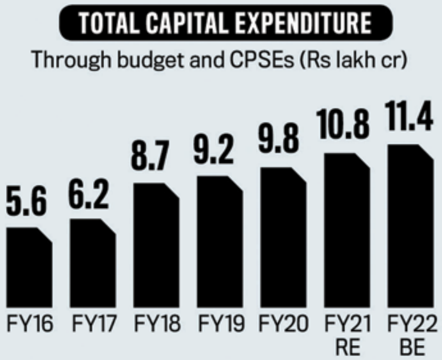
A Crisil research note points out that the government's total budgetary expenditure in relation to the size of the GDP has been dropping over the years as it tried to rein in the fiscal deficit. From 16.1 per cent of the GDP in fiscal 2010, total expenditure was down to 13.2 per cent in fiscal 2020. Much of this happened with the pruning of revenue expenditure, which fell from 14.3 per cent to 11.6 per cent in this period.

On the other hand, capex was relatively stable at a little below 2 per cent of GDP. "The pandemic has forced the government to take the expansionary path (even at the cost

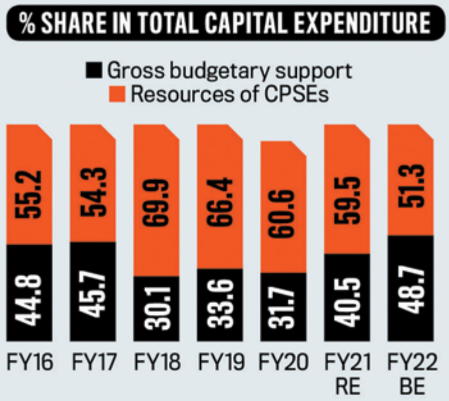
BUILDING BLOCKS

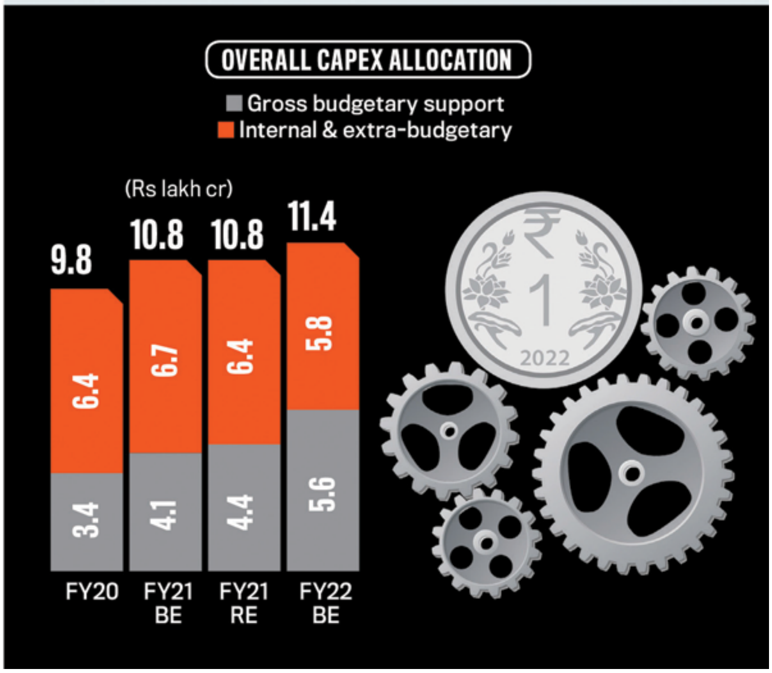
Total capital expenditure is set to increase dramatically in FY22, but now with more budgetary support than with the help of resources from the central public sector enterprises (CPSEs)

INCREASED CAPITAL SPENDING IN KEY INFRASTRUCTURE SECTORS


TOTAL CAPITAL EXPENDITURE

Through budget and CPSEs (Rs lakh cr)


% SHARE IN TOTAL CAPITAL EXPENDITURE


OVERALL CAPEX ALLOCATION

BE: Budget estimate/ RE: Revised estimate; Source: Union budget, NSO, Crisil

₹5.54 LAKH CRORE Capital expenditure target for 2021-22

of higher borrowings) as total expenditure in fiscal 2021 is slated to go up to 17.7 per cent and the government targets maintaining the pace even in fiscal 2022," the Crisil note says. The total budgetary expenditure for 2021-22 is pegged at Rs 34.8 lakh crore, which is less than a 1 per cent rise from the revised estimates of the previous fiscal.

THE CAPEX BOOST

Although the overall increase in budgetary expenditure for the next fiscal is meagre compared to the current fiscal, what has changed is the government's expenditure mix, and the rise in capital expenditure as compared to the revenue expenditure. Capital expenditure is set to rise to Rs 5.54 lakh crore in 2021-22 from Rs 4.39 lakh crore in the revised estimate this fiscal, an increase of 26 per cent. On the other hand, revenue expenditure, which refers to the government's day-to-day expenses such as salaries and pensions, has actually seen a fall of 3 per cent from the current year. Sanyal says that the government began to ramp up spending in October, with capital expenditure going up 125 per cent month-on-month from 2019; this continued with a 249 per cent jump in November and 62 per cent rise in December. This spending is apart from the spending on health and Covid-related expenditure that the government undertook.

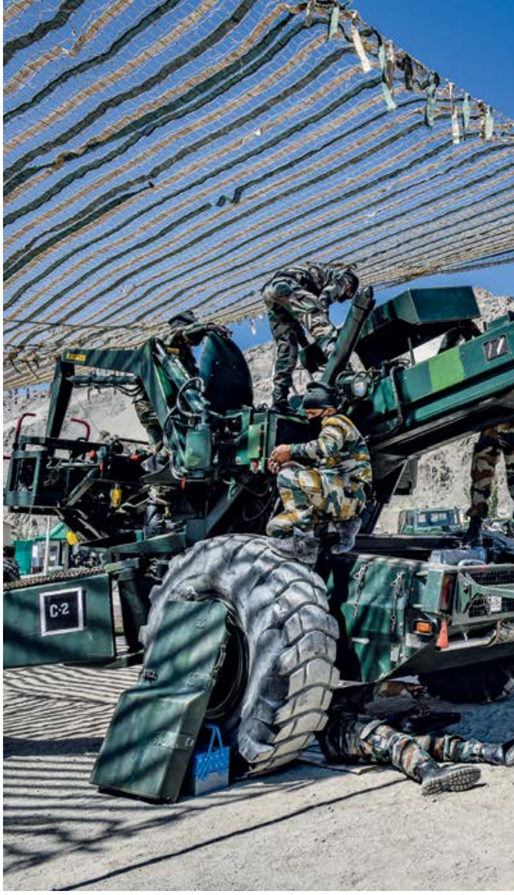
"The quality of spending is seen in the tilt towards capex," says D.K. Joshi, chief economist with Crisil. However, he says the state government capex will play an important role too. "Central government spending is not the ultimate; state government spending makes up 63 per cent of capex. The budget does support the capex by the state," he adds. The higher borrowings that the Centre will have to undertake to find resources will necessitate more liquidity management by the RBI. "The RBI will have to continuously do something so that the interest rate does not spike," says Madan Sabnavis, chief economist with Care Ratings. "It won't be smooth sailing." ■

Union Budget 2021
DEFENCE

BUDGET PINCER

China's military deployment along the northern frontiers leads to a spike in India's defence capital budget, but the bigger challenge will be prioritising acquisitions to modernise India's military

By SANDEEP UNNITHAN



BANDEEP SINGH

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE BORDER stand-off in May last year, the military burden imposed by China on India has cost the nation roughly Rs 20,766 crore. India's armed forces have had to buy additional weapons and military hardware after China suddenly deployed its military along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) last April.

This 20 per cent increase in capital expenditure—the difference between the budgetary estimate (what the government allocated) and the revised estimate (what it actually spent)—was one of the highlights of the budget presented by Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1. While this might have been a one-time emergency spend, the trend is set to continue. The budget flattened defence expenditure—the 1.4 per cent hike was the lowest in several years—but boosted capital expenditure for the armed forces to spend on buying new warships, tanks and fighter jets and building border roads and bridges. Last year, it spent Rs 1.13 lakh crore. This year, it will spend Rs 1.35 lakh crore on buying new military hardware.

The overall stagnation in the defence budget this year is worrying but understandable given the enormous pressure on the government. Defence accounts for close to 10 per cent of the Union budget and is the second-largest expenditure after debt servicing.

The Rs 4.7 lakh crore defence budget has three essential pillars—revenue, capital and defence pensions. Revenue and capital, which cover salaries and expenses like fuel and stores and buying military hardware, together make up 73 per cent of the defence budget or Rs 4.78 lakh crore. Defence pensions, what the government pays its 2.6 million ex-servicemen and defence civilians each year, is the third biggest component accounting for Rs 1.15 lakh crore (around 24.2 per cent of the budget). Last year, the pension budget grew faster than the defence budget because the government paid out approximately Rs 18,000 crore in pension arrears. The 13.4 per cent decrease in expenditure under the pension head this year has brought the armed forces reprieve.

1.4%

HIKE IN DEFENCE BUDGET, THE LOWEST IN SEVERAL YEARS

₹4.7

LAKH CRORE TOTAL DEFENCE BUDGET

How the armed forces handle the "highest ever increase in capital outlay for defence in 15 years", as defence minister Rajnath Singh called it, will be closely watched this year. The modernisation backlog is enormous and the money will disappear quickly. This month, the Indian Air Force will buy 83 Tejas Mark

COLD FRONT
Bofors gun on display during the practice of rescue and other operations carried out by army engineers in Leh in September 2020

1 fighter jets from state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, worth Rs 48,0000 crore, to replace over 100 retiring MiG-21 fighter jets. The navy will shortly issue requests for proposals for a Rs 45,000 crore project under which a foreign firm will build six conventional submarines with an Indian partner. The army plans to buy assault rifles, surface-to-air missiles and drones worth several thousand crores.

Laxman Kumar Behera, associate professor, special centre for national security studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, predicts a grim outlook for next year's defence budget. "A high fiscal deficit can be explained in a year of negative growth but it is unsustainable in the long run and that is why the defence budget (which is the GoI's second-largest expenditure head) will come under tremendous pressure," he says.

Top government officials say they hope to reduce the ballooning pension budget by increasing the retirement age of both officers and men. This, as Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Bipin Rawat told INDIA TODAY in an interview last December, will save the government several thousand crores in the short run.

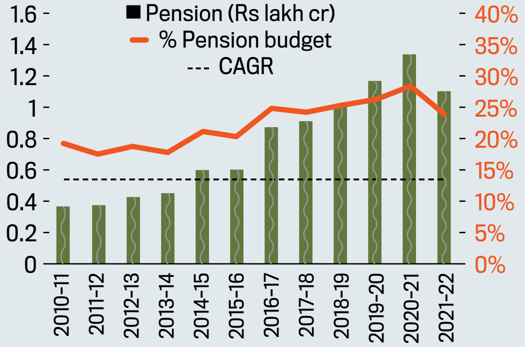
In the long run, the army—which accounts for over 50 per cent of the defence budget and over 80 per cent of its revenue and pension budget—has no option but to start shedding manpower. At 1.2 million troops, the Indian army is the world's second largest after China's People's Liberation Army (PLA). The Indian army is actually larger than the PLA Ground Forces, which, after a decade of downsizing, now number less than 1 million soldiers. The Indian army needs these soldiers to patrol over 4,000 km of unsettled borders with Pakistan and China. Last month, army chief General M.M. Naravane spoke of the army being alert along the entire 3,448 km LAC with China. This could mean that a large number of soldiers have been deployed along the border for extended training deployments—ready to be launched in case China steps in to create trouble in other sectors.

Senior military officials admit the Indian army needs to shed at least 300,000 soldiers to be able to pay for modernisation. This will clearly be a long-drawn process but there is little evidence that it has begun in earnest. The modernisation undertaken by Gen. Rawat and followed by his predecessor Gen. Naravane is moving ahead slowly and has yet to identify these troop cuts. How this can be done when the enemy is at the gates will be the billion-dollar question, and answering it could literally save billions. ■

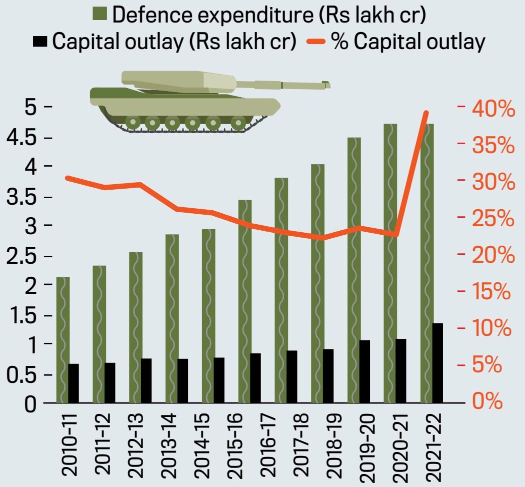
CAPITAL SURGE

The defence budget seems to have grown by 7.4% when compared to last year's budget estimates, but compared to the revised estimates, it has stagnated

EXPENDITURE ON DEFENCE PENSIONS



CAPITAL OUTLAY



Source: PRS Legislative Research

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

MANDAR DEODHAR

DEFT JAB
Madhura Patil, a dietician, gets the Covid-19 vaccine in Mumbai, Jan. 16

DRESSING UP THE WOUND

The health budget this year flatters to deceive

By AMARNATH K. MENON

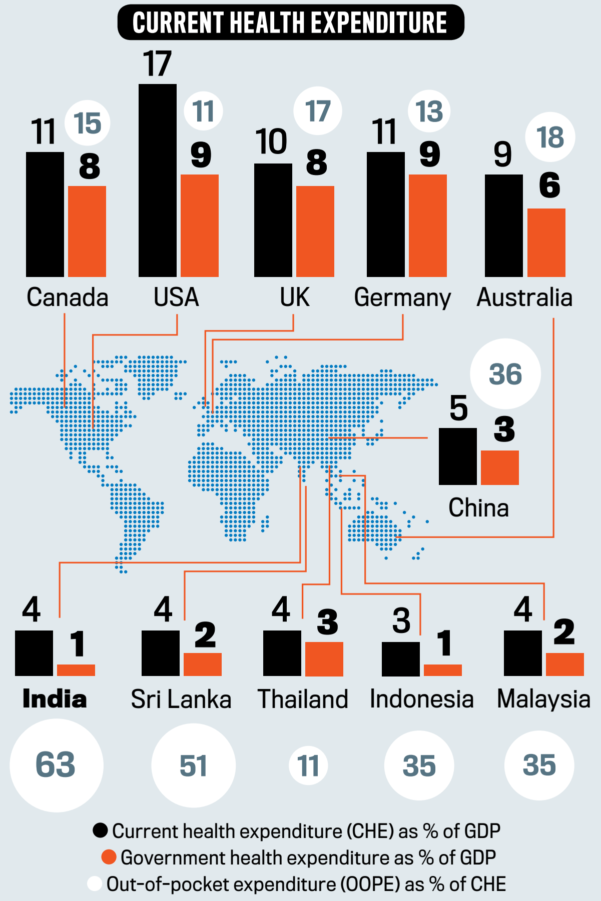
DESCRIBING 'HEALTH AND WELLBEING' as the first of six pillars on which the Union budget proposals rest, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced an outlay of Rs 2,23,846 crore for 2021-22. "A 137 per cent jump" on the face of it, it seemed the government had responded to the all-too-obvious gaps in the country's public healthcare set-up, which had been thoroughly exposed in the pandemic year. But it soon came to light that Sitharaman had indulged in a bit of 'magic math'. To the health ministry's allocation of Rs 71,269 crore, she has tacked on the Rs 35,000 crore set aside for Covid-19 vaccination, apart from Finance Commission grants of Rs 36,022 crore and Rs 13,192 crore, respectively, for water and sanitation and health (see accompanying graphic: *Health & Wellbeing Outlay*). She also announced a new Pradhan Mantri Atmanirbhar Swasth Bharat Yojana, with a budget outlay of Rs 64,180 crore—to be spent over the next six years at an average Rs 10,700 crore a year—to beef up the public health infrastructure. So, Sitharaman has combined several existing expense heads related to healthcare, not all managed by the health ministry and hitherto not accounted for as a part of the health budget.

The minister has provisioned Rs 76,902 crore in the budget estimates for 2021-22, which is barely 10.2 per cent more than the previous year's budget estimate (and down 10.8 per cent from the revised estimate of Rs 82,928

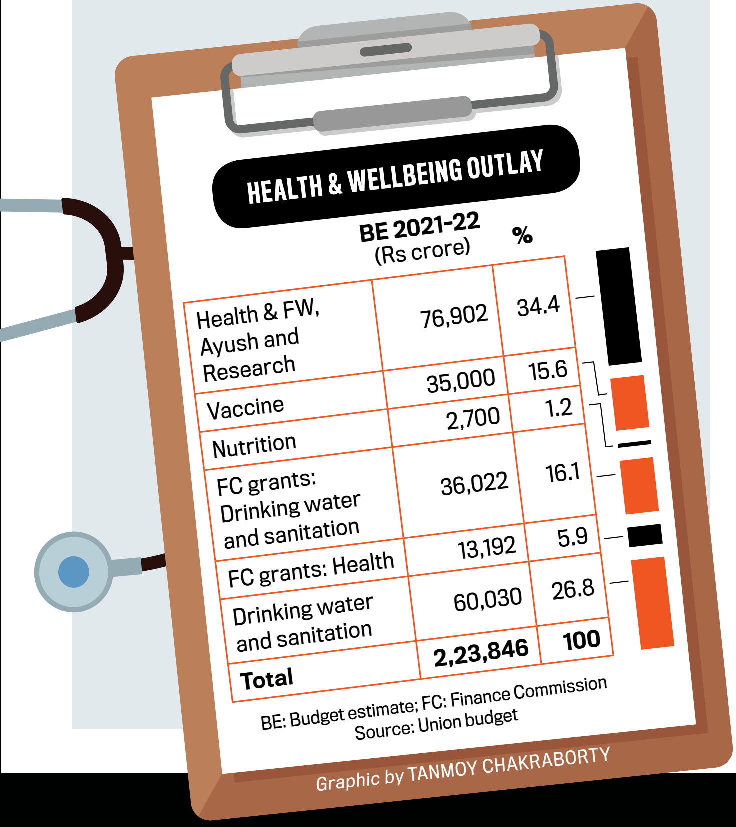
THE FUNDING GAP

India is a laggard when it comes to public healthcare. Households have to fill the provisioning gap with insupportable out-of-pocket expenses

CURRENT HEALTH EXPENDITURE



All figures for 2018; Source: WHO NHA database



HEALTH & WELLBEING OUTLAY

	BE 2021-22 (Rs crore)	%
Health & FW, Ayush and Research	76,902	34.4
Vaccine	35,000	15.6
Nutrition	2,700	1.2
FC grants: Drinking water and sanitation	36,022	16.1
FC grants: Health	13,192	5.9
Drinking water and sanitation	60,030	26.8
Total	**2,23,846**	**100**

BE: Budget estimate; FC: Finance Commission
Source: Union budget

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

crore for 2020-21). While funds for the ministry of health and family welfare increased marginally to Rs 71,269 crore from Rs 65,012 crore in 2020-21, the figure for the department of health research was Rs 2,663 crore (up from Rs 2,100 crore) and that of Ayush was Rs 2,970 crore (up from Rs 2,122 crore).

"The 137 per cent jump is not for health alone. It accounts for the social determinants of health, which include nutrition, drinking water, sanitation apart from health. It also includes spending for mass vaccination during a pandemic, which is just enhanced expense in an emergency," points out health economist Sarit Kumar Rout of the Indian Institute of Public Health, Bhubaneswar. The break-up reveals that only 34.3 per cent of the budget estimate is for health. "The allocation for vaccines will not cover the remaining 270 million of the total 300 million target the government has," says Dr K. Srinath Reddy, president, Public Health Foundation of India.

However, hospital administrators, medical device manufacturers and analysts are upbeat about the allocations, and hopeful they will spur growth. "Covid-19 was an unprecedented medical crisis and it underlined the importance of building a resilient healthcare infrastructure. This ground-breaking focus on health infrastructure will provide access to medical care for all in our country, fuel job creation and boost economic momentum," says Dr Prathap C. Reddy, chairman, Apollo Hospitals Group, adding that there is potential for India to become the largest global health technology centre. "Budget 2021 is largely focused on strengthening the basic government healthcare infrastructure with introduction of critical care hospital blocks, public health units and health emergency centres," says Hitesh Sharma, tax partner and life sciences leader, EY India. Dr G. Surender Rao, MD of Yashoda Hospitals Group, Hyderabad, points out that fund allocations aside, efficient implementation of policy will be key. "Deployment of technology, supporting international collaborations, boosting international medical tourism, widening insurance coverage can help bridge [critical] gaps," he says. The budget proposals are also silent on expanding the footprint of the government's flagship health insurance cover, PMJAY (Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana), to more sections of the population. Health insurance premiums are increasing and raising the premium amount eligible for tax deductions would have been a good initiative to encourage the middle income population to take health cover. Poor public health infrastructure and inordinately high out-of-pocket expenses (see graphic: *The Funding Gap*) impose a crushing financial burden on Indian households.

The allocations for public healthcare are far from what India needs, or even the stated goal of spending 2.5 per cent of the GDP by 2025. Analysts say public spend on healthcare needs to go up from the current 1.2 per cent over the next three years, much of which should be invested in creating and modernising health infrastructure. For this, they say, it is crucial that the government provides fiscal incentives and creates a sustainable public policy to encourage investment in private healthcare infrastructure. India's total healthcare spend is way below even smaller neighbour countries. Bhutan has already reached 2.5 per cent of its GDP and Sri Lanka 1.6 per cent. India currently has seven beds for every 10,000 citizens as against the global average of 27 beds. Further, the skilled health workforce does not meet the minimum threshold of 22.8 per 10,000 population recommended by the World Health Organization. ■

EDUCATION

₹**6,088** CRORE or 6.1% reduction in education budget from the previous year

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

The budgetary cut belies the government's ambition to overhaul India's education system and digital infrastructure

By KAUSHIK DEKA

IN THE PAST YEAR, AS INDIA, ALONG WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD, grappled with a global pandemic, the education sector underwent unprecedented transformations—schools and colleges remained shut and there was a sudden, unplanned switch to virtual modes of imparting education. Despite poor digital and other physical infrastructure, particularly in remote areas and among the lower strata of society, India embraced online education to avoid a complete breakdown of institutional learning.

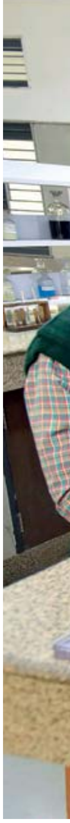
Under these circumstances, it's not surprising that the 2021-22 budget presented by Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman included a special emphasis on improving India's digital architecture. A National Digital Educational Architecture will be set up to support not only teaching and learning but also educational planning, governance and administrative activities.

Alongside digital infrastructure, a comprehensive overhaul of the education system is also envisaged under the new National Education Policy (NEP) announced in July 2020. Coming after a gap of 34 years, this policy revision was long overdue, and it was expected that the budget outlays would reflect a commitment to this ambition. Sitharaman announced that more than 15,000 schools will be qualitatively strengthened to include all components of the NEP and will handhold and mentor other schools to achieve the ideals of the policy. Some other initiatives, likely to aid the implementation of the NEP, have also been announced; for instance, the development of a National Professional Standard for Teachers. In addition to the 3 million elementary school teachers trained digitally, another 5.6 million will be trained via the National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement. The government will introduce CBSE board examination reforms in a phased manner, effective from academic year 2022-23. Instead of rote learning, students will be tested on conceptual clarity, analytical skills and real-life application of knowledge.

Surprisingly, though, the budget has no specific allocation of funds for implementation of the new NEP. In fact, there is a Rs 6,088 crore (or 6.1 per cent) reduction in the budget outlay over the previous year—at Rs 93,224 crore compared with Rs 99,312 crore (BE 2020-21). If it's any consolation, it's higher than the revised estimate of the 2020-21 budget—Rs 85,089 crore. Experts say this "hike" is not enough in the year after the launch of the NEP. "If the education ministry is allocated 0.42 per cent of the GDP, states will have to take on the extra burden to meet the NEP's recommendation to spend 6 per cent of the GDP on education, which is not likely to happen," says Protiva Kundu, a researcher at the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability in Delhi. Public spending on education currently hovers at around 3 per cent.

Former Delhi University vice-chancellor Dinesh Singh also laments the lack of emphasis in the budget on building a knowledge economy in the country. "I have not analysed the budget in detail, but we must not forget that all developed countries in the world have progressed because they have created a robust knowledge economy. The foundation of a self-reliant India must be based on a knowledge economy," he says.

Despite inadequate budgetary support, there have been several other proposals for the sector—some new and some rehashed from the past. Such as introducing legislation to set up a Higher Education Commission, an umbrella body for all higher education institutes.



GETTY IMAGES

^ A NEW ERA
Mask-clad students of Delhi's Kautilya Govt. Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya in their school laboratory

Over the next five years, Rs 50,000 crore is proposed to be spent on the National Research Foundation, also announced last year. In terms of new initiatives, the Centre will set up 100 new Sainik schools and a central university in Leh.

The budget also proposes to amend the Apprenticeship Act to enhance opportunities for the youth. The National Apprenticeship Training Scheme for post-education apprenticeship will be realigned and Rs 3,000 crore spent on training graduates and diploma-holders in engineering. Another initiative proposed in partnership with the UAE is to benchmark skill qualifications, assessment, certification and deployment of certified workforce. The collaborative Technical Intern Training Programme (TITP) between India and Japan to facilitate the transfer of Japanese industrial and vocational skills will be replicated with other countries.

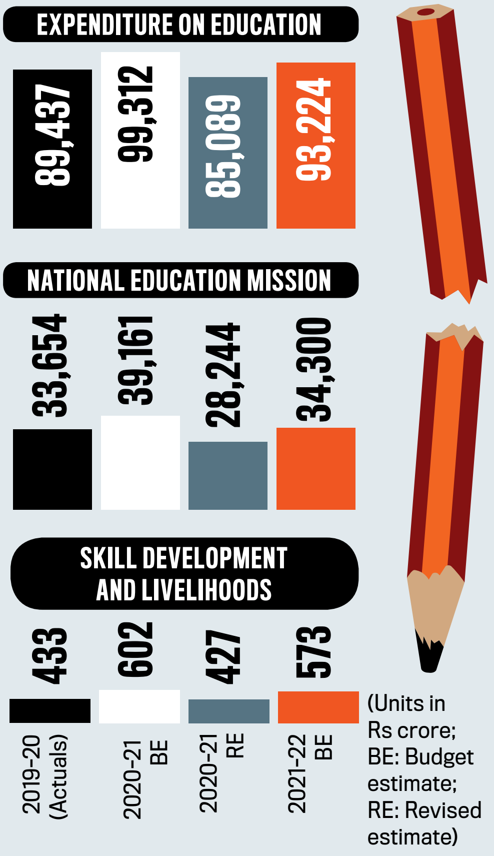
While these are laudable proposals, the budget lacked a uniform thrust on the education sector and matching fund allocations. ■

KEY PROPOSALS

- ➜ Over 15,000 schools will be qualitatively strengthened to roll out the NEP
- ➜ The govt will introduce legislation to set up the Higher Education Commission, announced last year
- ➜ Over the next five years, Rs 50,000 crore is proposed to be spent on the National Research Foundation, announced last year
- ➜ The govt will set up 100 Sainik schools across India; a central university in Leh
- ➜ In nine cities with various research institutes, the govt will create formal umbrella structures for these institutions to have better synergy, while retaining their internal autonomy
- ➜ The National Apprenticeship Training Scheme for post-education apprenticeship will be realigned; Rs 3,000 crore will be spent on training graduates and diploma-holders in engineering
- ➜ An initiative will be launched in partnership with the UAE to benchmark skill qualifications, assessment, certification and deploying certified workforce
- ➜ The TITP between India and Japan to facilitate transfer of Japanese industrial and vocational skills, and knowledge will be replicated with other countries

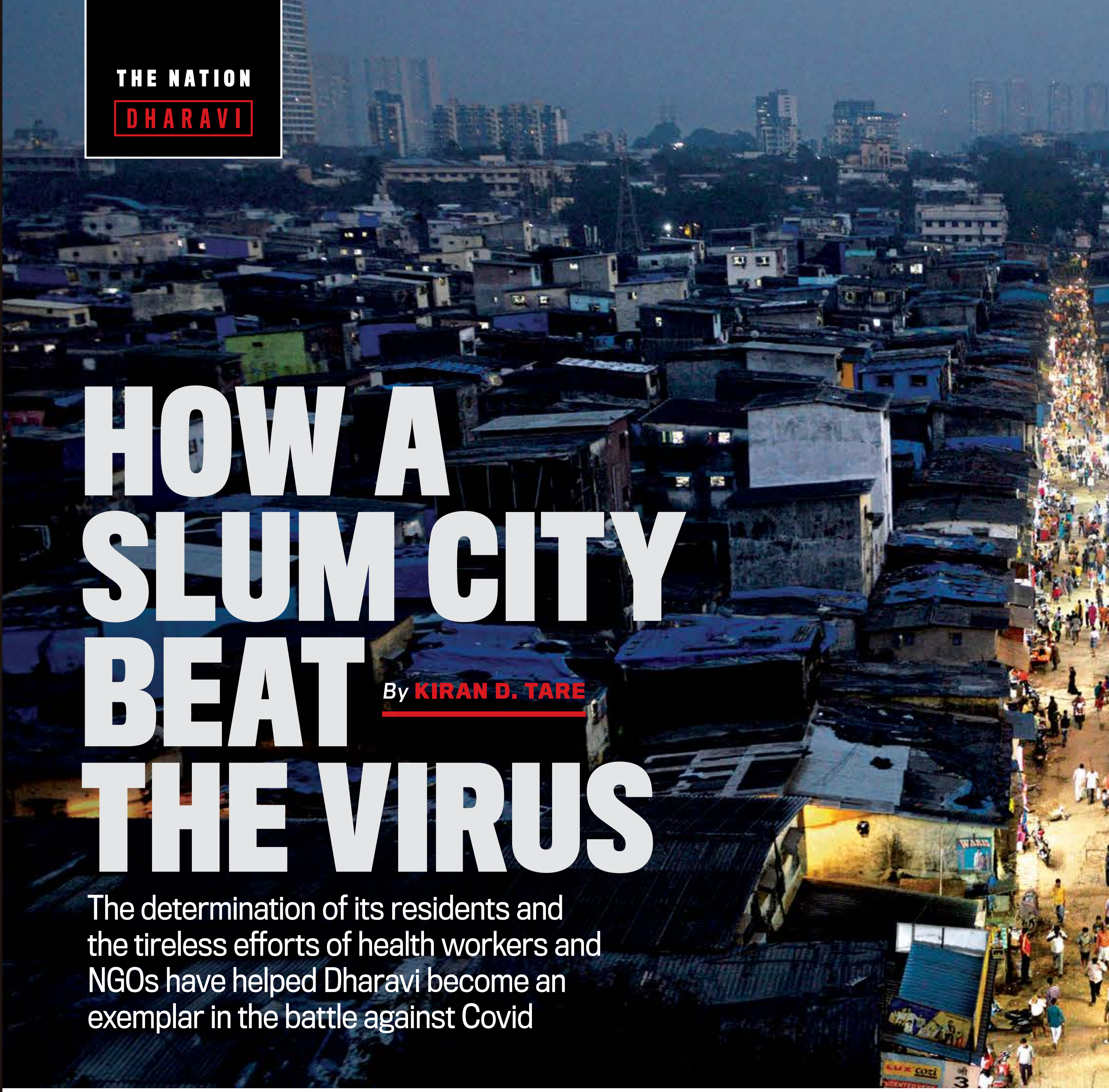
BEING ECONOMICAL WITH KNOWLEDGE

Contrary to expectations, and even after announcing an ambitious new National Education Policy, the budget has actually shrunk the outlay on education



(Units in Rs crore; BE: Budget estimate; RE: Revised estimate)

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY



HOW A SLUM CITY BEAT THE VIRUS

By **KIRAN D. TARE**

The determination of its residents and the tireless efforts of health workers and NGOs have helped Dharavi become an exemplar in the battle against Covid

Frequently tagged as ‘Asia’s largest slum’, Dharavi is made up of 17 localities, each one named after either the profession of its resident community or their state. Thus a potter will most likely be living in Kumbharwada, and a fisherman in Koliwada. Over 800,000 people (which is nearly half the population of Goa) live here, in an area no more than 2.5 square kilometres. On an average, one small room in Dharavi, measuring 10x10 ft, houses eight people. Surrounded by Mahim, Matunga and Dadar, Dharavi is the beating heart of India’s commercial capital.

3,930
TOTAL NO. OF CASES AS ON FEB. 1, 2021

312
TOTAL NO. OF DEATHS AS ON FEB. 1, 2021

0.09%
RATE OF INFECTION AS ON FEB. 1, 2021, LOWER THAN MUMBAI'S 0.12% AND INDIA'S 2.1%

0.5%
DEATH RATE AS ON FEB. 1, 2021, COMPARED TO MUMBAI'S 1.5% AND INDIA'S 1.4%

Photograph by MANDAR DEODHAR

Which is why when Covid first arrived here on April 1, Dharavi threatened to become a tinderbox for the spread of the disease, a potential super-spreader for Mumbai's 12.3 million-strong population. With its history as a breeding ground for disease and epidemics in the past, the fear was that Covid would escalate into a crisis like the outbreak of bubonic plague, which killed half of Dharavi's residents in 1896.

Yet, nine months later, Dharavi has emerged as a shining example of a community that defied both the odds and the virus. Till February 1, it had registered 3,930 cases, far fewer than its immediate neighbours—Dadar (4,924) and Mahim (4,791). On December 25, January 21 and February 2, Dharavi did not register a single positive case. It has also registered zero deaths since December 1. Its average daily cases have come down from 43 in May 2020 to six in December 2020, and the daily deaths from 10 to zero. On January 12, Dharavi's rate of infection at 0.09 per cent was below 0.21 per cent for Mumbai and 5.7 per cent for India. Its death rate of 0.47 per cent is also much lower than Mumbai's 1.5 per cent and India's 1.4 per cent. Its doubling rate in the same period has gone up from 10 days to 1,211 days, far higher than Mumbai's 565 days and India's 363.

What explains Dharavi's success? How did a congested settlement manage to turn around from being a Covid hotspot to showing others just how to defeat the virus?

To keep their shared toilets clean, a routine was devised for migrant workers to use them in shifts so that they could be sanitised in between

WHEN THE GOING GOT TOUGH...

...Dharavi's residents got going. It was their attitude as much as the tireless efforts of health workers and several NGOs that contributed to the settlement's success. “You will find a stock of hand sanitisers in every house today,” says Hilda Nadar, a primary school teacher who lives near 90 Feet Road.

Realising that large-scale screening was crucial for early detection and treatment, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) sprang into immediate action. The civic body roped in 24 private doctors—equipped with PPE kits, thermal scanners and pulse oximeters—to identify and isolate suspected cases through door-to-door screening in high-risk zones. Those with symptoms were moved to quarantine centres at the Bandra-Kurla Complex and Manohar Joshi College. Around 360,000 people have been tested so far.

Soon, several NGOs joined the BMC in the war against Covid. The Bharatiya Jain Sanghatana (BJS), the largest NGO to provide volunteers, involved 150 local doctors to screen the residents in 100 mobile dispensaries. Some 35 other NGOs reached Dharavi with medical help, food, masks, sanitisers and other essentials. “We had good coordination with the BMC,” says Nilendu Kumar, general manager (west zone), CRY (Child Relief & You). The volunteers at SNEHA, a partner NGO of CRY, camped in Dharavi, to track residents' needs. “They not only provided masks and sanitisers but also made the residents realise it was a battle they needed to win themselves.”

Indeed, awareness played a big role in helping Dharavi's residents battle Covid. It wasn't easy. “The residents of Koliwada used to threaten us with dire consequences whenever we knocked on their doors for screening,” recalls Anagha Amburle, 54, a nurse with the BMC. “Today, they call me *tai*.” Bit by bit, Amburle and her team of 30 women health workers succeeded in convincing residents about the importance of washing hands and sanitising their homes.

Shantilal Mutha, president of BJS, also recounts how their volunteers worked towards minimising fear among residents. They insisted the virus could be defeated if they got themselves screened for symptoms and got early treatment if infected. “Once the residents realised we were there to help them out and had no ill will, they began queuing up for screening,” says Mutha.

In many instances, local ingenuity came to the rescue. Rajendra Bhoite, owner of a leather shop in Dharavi who is also a social worker attached to the Tata Memorial Cancer Hospital in Bhoiwada, cites the example of Dharavi's migrant workers, who come mostly from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand, and make up a third of its population. Living either in overcrowded rooms, for which they pay Rs 3,000-5,000 as rent, or sleeping on the floors of factories where they work, they share 450 public toilets among them. Since close to 80 people use one public toilet, keeping them free of infection was a challenge. The locals, says Bhoite, devised a routine whereby the migrants would use the toilets in shifts. “Only a certain number of people would go in at one time, the next batch would be allowed only after the toilets had been sanitised thoroughly.”

The next challenge came when Mumbai began lifting its lockdown gradually and Dharavi's five big industries—leather, garments, pottery and plastic recycling—opened up. The poorly-ventilated, cramped factories became potential Covid hazards. To avoid a crisis, local BMC ward officer Kiran Dighavkar made masks, face shields, gloves and sanitisers available to the workers free of cost. The 37-year-old civil engineer also managed to get positive patients isolated in three facilities within Dharavi. “Only critical patients were moved to hospitals for treatment,” he says.

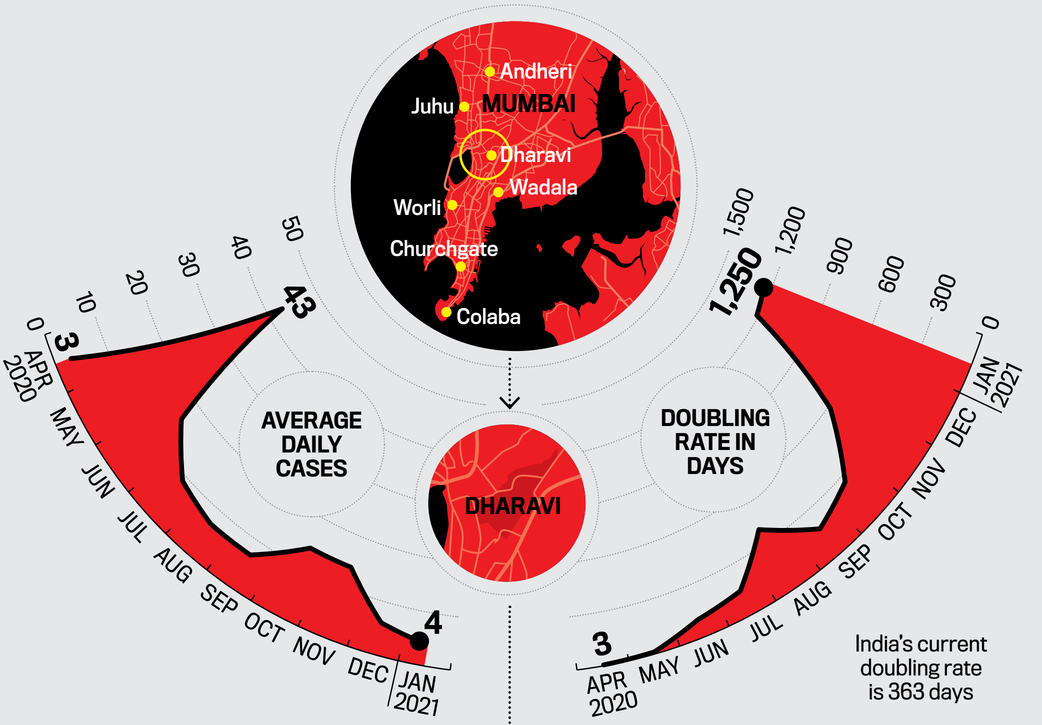
THE OTHER FACTORS

Some scientists believe that the secret of Dharavi's success may be herd immunity. A serology survey by the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in October found that almost 60 per cent of Dharavi's population had been exposed to the virus and developed antibodies. The uninfected residents, therefore, were not at risk until they travelled outside Dharavi.

Dr Sanjay Oak, head of the Maharashtra task force on Covid-19, is among those who think that herd immunity helped Dharavi overcome the virus. “As Dharavi is a cramped place, the residents got infected rapidly. Fortunately, most of them were asymptomatic.” Some 150,000 migrant labourers had also left for their home towns when the lockdown was announced, reducing

CONQUERING THE C-WORD

FROM BEING A COVID HOTSPOT, DHARAVI SHOWED THE WAY IN HOW TO REIN IN THE SPREAD OF INFECTION AND KEEP THE MORTALITY RATE LOW



India's current doubling rate is 363 days

BUSINESS HUB

Area
2.5 sq. km.

Population density
227,136
per sq. km.

GST-registered enterprises
5,000

Single-room factories
15,000

Annual turnover
$1 bn

Population using community toilets
80%

Community toilets used every day
450

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

the burden on the administration. “As the residents became immune, our fight against the virus started yielding results,” says Dr Oak.

However, the return to ‘normalcy’ could rapidly undo Dharavi’s success story. Its streets are seeing pre-lockdown level crowds, and largely without masks. The cleanliness and strict discipline of the lockdown days is fast disappearing. The public toilets, once cleaned and sanitised regularly, are back to being dirty. “We try to convince them that the mask is mandatory till the virus is completely eradicated, but they don’t bother,” says Amburle. “Some of them,” says Nadar, “have even asked me whether the coronavirus really existed.”

Many believe herd immunity helped Dharavi defeat Covid. The departure of 1.5 lakh migrants also eased pressure on the administration

WHAT LIES AHEAD

Meanwhile, residents have plenty of other worries to preoccupy them. Dharavi’s MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) may be back in business, but those who run them are not entirely happy. Abdul Sattar, who runs a *zari* work factory, says his business has returned to only 5 per cent of what it used to be prior to the lockdown. “The big cloth makers used to keep a large stock before the lockdown. Now, they are not interested in investing money in the business,” says Sattar, who employs eight workers, all of them migrants from Bihar.

The future looks equally bleak for Balu Murugan, who had moved to Mumbai from his native Tamil Nadu in 2012, and used to make a living selling idlis. He and his family went back home when the lockdown was announced, but returned in December when they heard things had started getting better. However, while earlier he could make Rs 1,500 daily selling his home-made fare in Dadar, these days even 12 hours of selling yields only around Rs 700 a day. “I have not brought my children back to Mumbai. They are still in Madurai,” he says. Murugan is worried about paying his rent of Rs 3,000 and his landlord has refused to waive the amount for the nine months he was away. “I could pay only Rs 12,000, which I earned by working as a tree cutter in my village. I don’t know what the future holds.” It is a question many are asking. ■

THE WINNING WAY

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THE DEPTH OF TALENT IN THIS YOUNG INDIAN SIDE WAS MANIFEST. WHAT WASN'T IN PLAIN SIGHT, THOUGH, IS THE PROCESS OF DISCOVERING AND NURTURING THAT TALENT

***By* Boria Majumdar**

India was in lockdown between March and July 2020 and all sport had come to a standstill. The backrooms of India's cricket establishment, however, were still abuzz. In May 2020, Ravi Shastri, head coach of the national side, called his deputy Bharat Arun and asked him to work on a new plan. This was for the upcoming Australia tour, scheduled to begin in November and, at the time, still six months away. The plan was a bit counter-intuitive, and "we even argued over it", says Arun, "but Ravi was like, just spend some time on it and see where it goes". In a game and in conditions where the quicks try so hard to tempt the offside edge, the Indian bowlers were to take the offside out of the equation. When Arun subsequently asked the team analyst to pull out the stats for Steve Smith and Marnus Labuschagne—two anchors in the Aussie batting order—they found that "[in] cuts, drives and glides to thirdman, 70 per cent or more runs

BYJU'S
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MPL

AP

HEADY TRIUMPH
The Indian team celebrates its Test and series victory against Australia at the Gabba in Brisbane

GETTY IMAGES

had come on the offside", says Arun. He knew the head coach was onto something, and thus was born the 'leg-trap plan' of choking the flow of runs and frustrating the Aussie batsmen into making errors. "Even if Smith scored a hundred—and he is a great player—he had to face 200 balls to get there," says Arun. (In Sydney, Smith took 200-plus deliveries to get to his only three-figure score in seven completed innings.)

"Why talk only about the Test series?" asked R. Sridhar, India's fielding coach, during an interaction for this essay. "We were written off after losing the first two ODIs. Many said we wouldn't win a single game, and when Virat (Kohli) left after the Adelaide Test, we were expected to just cave in."

On the night of that 36 all out humiliation at Adelaide, there was a team meeting. "We were determined to get past that one bad hour (when the team lost the plot and caved in), and a lot of ideas were on the table," says Ajinkya Rahane, who was to take over as captain in these most challenging circumstances. "That's when Ravi*bhai* said we could think of 36 as a badge. Would it be a badge of disgrace or a badge of honour? That 36 all out was the beginning of the turnaround," says the stand-in skipper.

While India were reasonably confident of skipper Rahane, batsman Rahane had to step up to the plate to give his team a chance. By way of preparation before he went out to bat, Rahane sat and watched his idol Sachin Tendulkar's innings of 116 at Melbourne in 1999. And it did put him in the zone to play a most memorable knock. The

POWER BACKUP

Many of the finds of this Australian tour were reserve players, who will give the Indian team management new ideas to play with in future

RISHABH PANT

❍ **Debut year**: 2017

❍ **Debut format:** T20I

❍ **Has played for India in:** Tests, ODIs, T20Is

❍ **Career best (Tests):** 159* vs Aus, 2019

....

✪ **Star turn on Aus 2020-21 tour:** a match- and series-winning 89* at Brisbane (Test #4); also the 97 in Sydney (Test #3)

MOHAMMED SIRAJ

❍ **Debut year**: 2017

❍ **Debut format:** T20I

❍ **Has played for India in:** Tests, ODIs, T20Is

❍ **Career best (Tests):** 5/73 vs Australia, 2020-21

....

✪ **Star turn on Aus 2020-21 tour:**

5/73 in the 2nd innings, Brisbane (Test #4)

SHUBMAN GILL

❍ **Debut year**: 2019

❍ **Debut format:** ODI

❍ **Has played for India in:** Tests, ODIs

❍ **Career best (Tests):** 91 vs Aus, 2020-21

....

✪ **Star turn on Aus 2020-21 tour:**

A fifty on his Test debut in Sydney (Test #3); laid the foundation for India's victory in Brisbane

NAVDEEP SAINI

❍ **Debut year**: 2019

❍ **Debut format:** T20I

❍ **Has played for India in:** Tests, ODIs, T20Is

❍ **Career best (T20I):** 3/17 vs West Indies, 2019

....

✪ **Star turn on Aus 2020-21 tour:**

Came on to bowl in Brisbane (2nd innings) after picking up a groin injury in the first

SHARDUL THAKUR

❍ **Debut year**: 2017

❍ **Debut format:** ODI

❍ **Has played for India in:** Tests, ODIs, T20Is

❍ **Career best (Tests):** 4/61 and 67 vs Australia, 2020-21

....

✪ **Star turn on Aus 2020-21 tour:**

7 wickets and 67 runs at Brisbane (Test #4)

WASHINGTON SUNDAR

❍ **Debut year**: 2017

❍ **Debut format:** ODI

❍ **Has played for India in:** Tests, ODIs, T20Is

❍ **Career best (Tests):** 3/89 and 62 vs Australia, 2020-21

....

✪ **Star turn on Aus 2020-21 tour:** Getting a set Smith out in the 1st innings at Brisbane, going on to take 3 wickets; 62 in India's first outing; getting Warner in the 2nd

T. NATARAJAN

❍ **Debut year**: 2020

❍ **Debut format:** ODI

❍ **Has played for India in:** Tests, ODIs, T20Is

❍ **Career best (Tests):** 3/30 vs Aus, 2020-21

....

✪ **Star turn on Aus 2020-21 tour:**

Only Indian player to debut in all three formats in one series

AJINKYA RAHANE

❍ **Debut year**: 2011

❍ **Debut format:** T20I

❍ **Has played for India in:** Tests, ODIs, T20Is

❍ **Career best (Tests):** 188 vs New Zealand, 2016

....

✪ **Star turn on Aus 2020-21 tour:**

Rahane had to lead by example and his 112 in Melbourne began the team's historic comeback

CHETESHWAR PUJARA

❍ **Debut year**: 2010
❍ **Debut format:** Test
❍ **Has played for India in:** Tests, ODIs
❍ **Career best (Tests):** 206* vs England, 2012

• • • • • • • • • • • • • •

✪ **Star turn on Aus 2020-21 tour:**

77 of 205 balls in Sydney helped India save the Test; 56 of 211 balls in Brisbane laid the foundation of a famous victory

“SYDNEY MADE US BELIEVE ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE. COMING OUT OF THAT TEST UNDEFEATED WHEN SO MANY OF OUR PLAYERS WERE INJURED MADE US FEARLESS, WHICH SHOWED IN BRISBANE”

–Bharat Arun

112 he scored before he was run out gave the team just the springboard it needed. “That hundred changed everything for us. All of a sudden, we had a chance. We knew if we got a lead of a hundred-odd, we could get them out cheaply in the second innings,” says Ravindra Jadeja, the other architect of the Melbourne victory.

Apart from the preparation on and off the field and a self-belief, bordering on arrogance, that has come to define this young Indian team’s approach to the game, their fairytale success in Australia also threw into relief the resilience of the side and the depth of talent that made it possible to script the fairytale. The alarming string of injuries on tour belied the high level of fitness that has become the default setting of the national side under Kohli. Critics questioning the management of players’ workloads or recovery routines fail to see that some of these injuries—like Mohammed Shami’s in Adelaide or Ravindra Jadeja’s in Sydney—were impact injuries, bearing no relationship with the fitness of these players. In fact, Shami and Jadeja are both supremely fit. For the other injuries too, in this otherwise very fit side, there is a likely reason. “India was in lockdown for seven months and none of our boys had the time to go through the kind of conditioning necessary for a gruelling red ball series such as this one,” says Sridhar, before adding, “In Australia, on the other hand, there was never a hard lockdown—except in Victoria for a month and a half—which meant the Australian players always had access to grounds and basic training facilities. For us, hardly any player did any conditioning before the IPL. And T20 cricket never gets you ready for a Test series of this nature.”

Even through this battle with injuries, possibly brought on by the lack of adequate conditioning, what also came to the fore was the team’s resilience, its never-say-die spirit, in the face of pain, bubble fatigue and worse. “Yes, I was ready to bat in the second innings at Sydney,” says Jadeja. (He had dislocated his left thumb in the first outing.) “I had trouble wearing gloves, so I put them on hours before I might have been needed to go out. ...if I could save the game for India, it would mean a lot to me and my team.” Ravichandran Ashwin, another star of the series, stood for three hours before going in to bat in the second innings at Sydney (Test #3, which India saved, keeping the series open, thanks to the heroics of Ashwin, Hanuma Vihari and others). “Ashwin did not sit because if he did, he wouldn’t be able to get up,” says Arun. Vihari, who himself battled on with a torn hamstring alongside Ashwin, said: “The Australian fast bowlers were bowling short to him. I went up to Ash and said he would find it easier if he bent his knees a little more. He said with the kind of back spasms he was experiencing, if he bent any more, he wouldn’t be able to stand up,” laughed Vihari. The two soldiered on and between them played 260 deliveries to thwart Australia from taking an unbeatable 2-1 series lead, going into the fourth and final Test at the Gabba in Brisbane.

“Sydney made us believe that anything is possible,” recalls Arun. “Coming out of that Test undefeated when so many of our players were injured made us fearless, and that fearlessness showed in Brisbane.”

On show at the Gabba was the indomitable spirit of this Indian side. “Ravi had spoken to the boys at the start of day 5, and instructed them to play as if it were the first day of the match. The plan was to take a call at tea based on the number of wickets lost and runs needed. When Mayank (Agarwal) got out (score: 265/ 5; 86.4 overs) and we still had 15 overs to get through (and were still 63 runs short of the victory target of 328), a section of us wanted to play out 10 overs, secure a draw and then take a chance. Rishabh (Pant) and (Washington) Sundar, however, had other ideas. They are a generation younger, and you saw what they did,” says Sridhar, eyes alight again with remembered awe. Senior pro Arun concurs: “I went up to Ajinkya and Rohit to check if they felt the need to send in instructions. They said we had come too far to stop them, and to just sit back and watch the fun.”

Sundar, on his Test debut, had said to Pant he was comfortable taking on Pat Cummins (the leading strike bowler for the Aussies and Player of the Series), that *he* would go for the runs while Pant, the senior batsman of the two, should hang back and bat till the end. Not for a moment was Sundar overawed by Cummins, the #1 Test bowler in the world. That kind of self-belief has become the signature of this young Indian side, with the likes of Mohammed Siraj, Shardul Thakur and Shubman Gill being the latest champions of this bullishness.

Gill, who had spoken to Tendulkar before leaving for Australia, had trained under Yuvraj Singh and was ready to take on the Australian trio of Mitchell Starc, Cummins and Josh Hazlewood from the very first ball he faced. That he is a class apart was evident when he launched into Starc on day 5 at Brisbane. A pull over midwicket followed by a cut over thirdman was strongly reminiscent of a 19-year-old Tendulkar announcing himself on the world stage at Perth in 1992. We knew Gill had potential, but he has shown nerves to match.

“To lose one man after another and yet stand up for a fight is the hallmark of this team,” says Gideon Haigh, one of the finest writers on cricket. “It is astonishing to think they were missing eight of their first-team players in the final Test and yet they kept on pushing Australia at fortress Gabba. It is a very Australian trait that we have seen in this [Indian] team. In the late 1990s, Australia had 22 players who could easily turn up and beat any team in the world. Maybe it is India’s turn now. The talent and the depth of Indian cricket has stood out in this series.”

HOWZAT! Washington Sundar celebrates after taking the wicket of Cameron Green on day two of the 4th Test

GETTY IMAGES

The deep talent pool Haigh talks about is not a freak coincidence—the national side now has a reliable feeder system. Talent is discovered early, via the state associations, the Under-19 and Ranji Trophy selections, the India A ‘shadow tours’—not to forget the IPL (Indian Premier League). Even more than its riches, what the IPL has made possible is a scenario where a debutant T. Natarajan, who played his first Test in Brisbane, had already played alongside someone like David Warner, and against others like Smith or Cummins, and was not overawed by their reputations. The ‘shadow tours’ organised by the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) for the India A team—before the national side tours the same country—gives national-side prospects and hopefuls an early taste of playing conditions. “We’ve all played in Australia before as part of the India A side,” says Vihari.

If India today look like the team to beat, it’s hard to pinpoint a single most important reason for this. It’s not simply about an abundance of raw talent and bench strength. Nor just early strategic planning or institutionalised processes for discovery of talent. Nor only well-timed exposure for national prospects or better infrastructure at home and professional rewards. They all matter, of course, and do critically shape outcomes. Also on view in this new unit is a new professionalism, which must count among the magic ingredients of its success. It’s manifest in their ability to quickly move on—both from the most crushing disappointment (Adelaide) as well as incredible success (Brisbane)—to the next task at hand. England are touring, and the Test series begins on February 5. Even as we wish to linger over a very special victory Down Under, Team India has moved on and into a new bio-bubble in Chennai. “Just as we moved on from the 36 all out, it was important to move on from the series victory as well. That’s now history,” says Arun. ■

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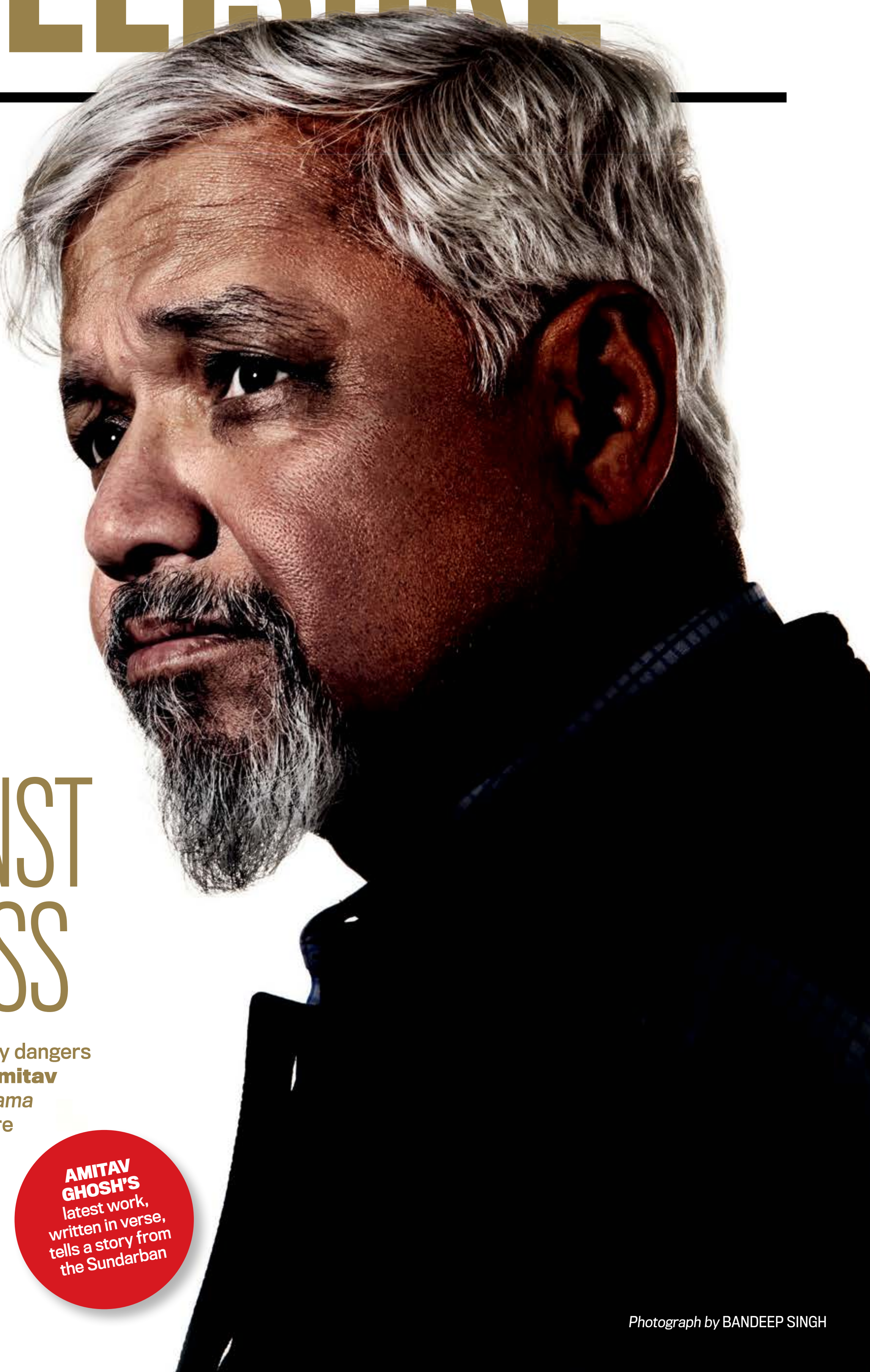
THE FIRST 50 YEARS
PG 58

LEISURE

Q&A WITH
BOMBAY JAYASHRI
RAMNATH PG 62



BOOKS

A WAR AGAINST EXCESS

Examining the many dangers of human greed, **Amitav Ghosh's** *Jungle Nama* prescribes measure over materialism

AMITAV GHOSH'S latest work, written in verse, tells a story from the Sundarban

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

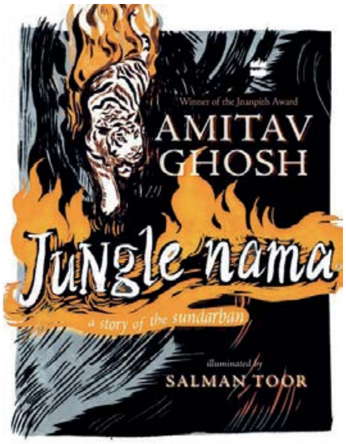
Amitav Ghosh has been visiting the Sundarban forest ever since he was a child. “It’s one of the places where you can see that the earth is alive, that the earth is really Gaia, a living entity. You *see* erosion. You see deposits being laid in front of your very eyes,” he says. This vividness that Ghosh describes is true of both the landscape and his writing of it. After two novels—*The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019)—the author again returns to the mangrove forest for his new book, *Jungle Nama*. Written entirely in verse, it proves Ghosh’s talent, but it also signals to the forest’s abundance. If you’re looking for stories, the Sundarban has a prodigious capacity. It is the kind of gift that keeps on giving.

Reading Ghosh’s 24-syllable couplets, one is forced to ask if he has secretly dabbled in poetry all along. “I last wrote poetry as a boy,” he laughs. “But poetry, in the modern sense, helps you express your innermost feelings in verse. This is more a form of narrative. The meter carries the narrative on its own. You can say that *Jungle Nama* is about many things, but it’s also about the magic of meter.”

With *Jungle Nama*, Ghosh adapts a Sundarban legend that is performed by *jatra* companies even today. Though Ghosh did tell us stories of Bon Bibi in *The Hungry Tide*, it is *Jungle Nama* that helps us better examine the myth of the forest’s guardian. In the end, when she saves Dukhey, a poor deck hand betrayed by his greedy uncle, Dhona, we see her restore both moral and ecological balance. But for his prayers to be heard by Bon Bibi, Dukhey must first count the syllables that make up his invocations. Ghosh says, “The story of *Jungle Nama* is about the necessity for limits, for humans to recognise boundaries. And meter does exactly the same thing with words. It forces you to recognise basic forms of expression and the need for boundaries. That is exactly what the story became for me.”

Ghosh’s *Jungle Nama*, you quickly realise, is an allegory, and you only need to look at the couplets in isolation to unearth bigger meaning: “*You must stay within your bounds and never transgress; with what you have you must make do, don’t seek excess*.” Even though the effects of climate change on the Sundarban are conspicuous, Ghosh seems to want his parable to make a larger, more universal point. Dhona’s desire to rob the forest of its riches, for instance, is an obvious stand-in for the demands we make of the Earth. “Capitalism only survives in circumstances of discontent. It makes people want more, more and more. And now, you know, we are the endpoint of that wanting more. It has brought us to this planetary catastrophe that is going to end human civilisation as we know it,” says the author.

The story of *Jungle Nama* is about the necessity of limits, of humans recognising natural boundaries



JUNGLE NAMA
A Story of the Sundarban
by Amitav Ghosh,
illustrated by Salman Toor
FOURTH ESTATE
₹699; 88 pages

Speaking over Zoom from his New York home, Ghosh argues that stories are fundamental to human existence. “But think of the stories we are brought up with. They all urge you to fulfil all ambitions. ‘Just do it.’ ‘Impossible is nothing.’ There are no limits. This message is beaten down on us through advertisements, the media. Where do we look for the opposite message?” Since contemporary stories about the climate are hard to find, Ghosh believes folklore can fill that void: “In these stories, we find an inter-connectivity between people and the land that sustains them.” It’s in the stories of those who live close to the land—farmers, fishermen, etc.—that the author feels we might see our world renew.

Words, says Ghosh, are partly responsible for the crisis facing us and our planet. Our obsession with words, in turn, leaves us obsessed with a life and culture that is predominantly human. “We refuse to recognise the reality of a whole plethora of beings that inhabit the world.” In his book-length essay on the climate crisis, *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh suggests that writers will need to invent new forms in order to look at our fast-collapsing world in a different way. Having collaborated with New-York based artist Salman Toor for *Jungle Nama*, the author has attempted to forge that new idiom.

The drawings by Toor make *Jungle Nama* a book you can both see and read. Admiring the “genius” of his collaborator, Ghosh says he prefers the word “illumination” to “illustration”: “The word ‘illustration’ suggests that the word of the text is prior, that the image is a kind of servant of the text,” he says, “whereas the word ‘illuminated’ says it throws light upon the text.” Ghosh, for his part, can’t help but throw light on a crisis many of us wilfully ignore: “Once you become aware of what is actually happening in the world, you cannot ever put it out of your mind. It’s in the background of everything.” ■

–Shreevatsa Nevatia

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BOOKS

Learning the Hard Way

Recounting the successes of JNU, these essays tell a story that vandalism can't tarnish

JNU
STORIES
THE FIRST 50 YEARS

JNU STORIES
The First 50 Years
Edited by Neeladri Bhattacharya, Kunal Chakrabarti, S. Gunasekaran, Janaki Nair, Joy L.K. Pachuau
ALEPH
₹**999; 544** pages

The 50th anniversary of any institution should be an occasion for celebration. And the appearance of this handsome volume of thoughtful, affectionate essays—*JNU Stories: The first 50 years*—lavishly illustrated with photographs from that already distant time, is welcome. But it is doubly welcome because the unmistakably elegiac tone of many of the essays here reminds us that this anniversary coincides, roughly, with another—when masked hoodlums rampaged through the JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) campus, apparently aided and abetted and certainly not restrained by the Delhi Police. So, anniversary, elegy and obituary—all occasions for reflection, I suppose.

The very fact that an institution like JNU came to be established at all seems—rather like Vishwa Bharati—incongruous, especially in a time of infantile gigantism: biggest statue, tallest flagpole, largest flag. The sense that Delhi University had bloated beyond all possibility of being viable was already in the air in the early '60s. But South Campus was at best a kind of spatial solution. It was and has remained inevitably bound up with the parent, and increasingly decrepit, institution. There were fascinating arguments about the possible shapes of a new university. At one end, there was the French model of the *grande ecoles*—self-consciously exclusive, unabashedly dedicated to the creation of an intellectual elite. There was the model of the institute of advanced study—as at Princeton—which wouldn't allow itself to become embroiled with scruffy undergraduates, but would do cutting-edge research in the service of the nation, then emerging into the now-former future.

What emerged in JNU was, however, a uniquely Indian hybrid, one that married the ideal of intellectual excellence with the idea of "service" to the specific demands of a vibrant and numerous democracy—and only the terminally phobic will miss the mark of what we call Nehruvian ideology on that hybrid. Still, cynics might well point out the further mutation of the idea of "service" in the fact that JNU became, to a significant extent, a nursery for the "civil service". (After all, it is perhaps only the "anti-nationals" who redeem(ed) it as a University!)

JNU emerged as a **UNIQUELY INDIAN HYBRID,** marrying intellectual excellence with public service

It would be foolishly romantic to suggest that the JNU experiment was a uniform success—no genuine experiment can be. But there were many remarkable successes. Thus, the reinvention of the discipline of history in our time—such that it has become the central social science discipline, owes a great deal to JNU. In another essay, Abhijit Banerjee wittily recalls how he sought out JNU economics as an alternative to the "D School" model—which was seen as a passport to America. The fact that he ended up in America anyway—and won a Nobel Prize—shows that he was both wrong, and right, in choosing JNU. I'm sure this game of listing successes (and failures) can yield hours of contention, but the fact that the JNU experiment succeeded in any measure at all is cause for gratitude. We nearly had a real University, once. ■

—Alok Rai

JYOTI KAPOOR/ INDIA TODAY ARCHIVE

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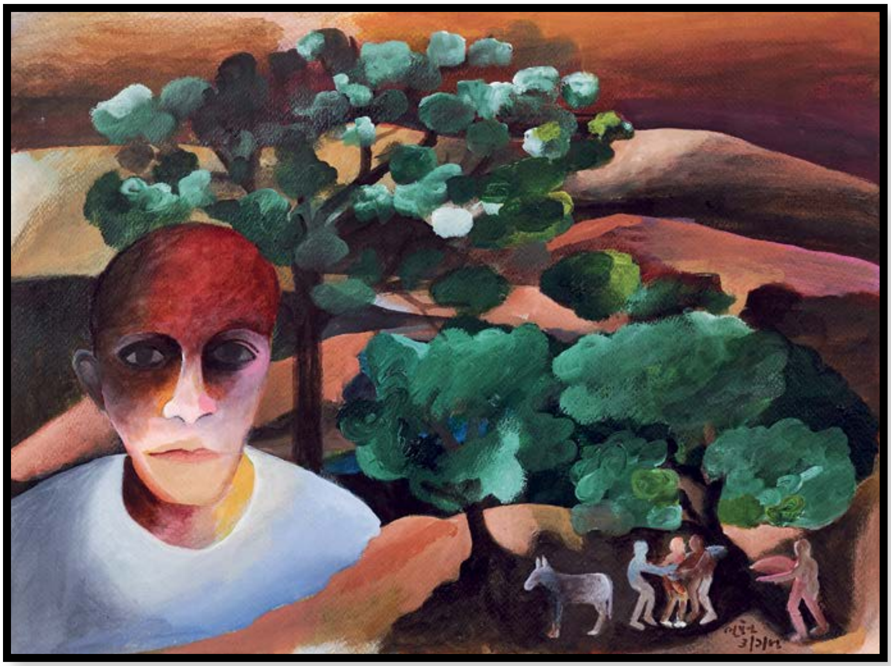
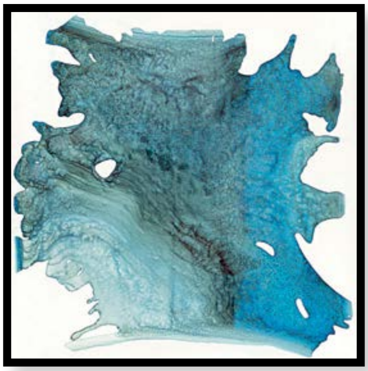
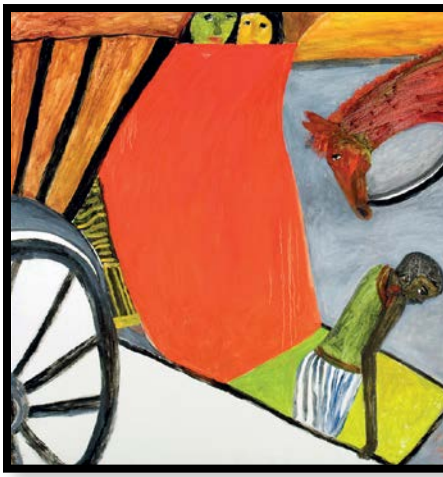
① 'Untitled', by Bhupen Khakhar



② 'Coral Fever' by Aditi Singh





③ Artwork by Kartick Chandra Pyne

RESTART

ART

WITH GALLERIES NOW TRYING TO BEAT THE PANDEMIC, THE ART CALENDAR IS LOOKING FULL AGAIN

After COVID-19 forced them to down their shutters for the better part of 2020, galleries and museums are reopening–minus the cocktails and cheese, of course. On January 14, in Mumbai alone, nearly 22 galleries unveiled new shows to coincide with the ninth Mumbai Gallery Weekend 2021, one of the biggest cultural events in the city. Other art hubs are following suit. Here are some online and offline exhibitions worth making time for.

1. PROXIMATE PATHS

Bhupen Khakhar & Jogen Chowdhury

AKARA ART, MUMBAI

(Until Feb. 28)

"I liked Bhupen's sense of humour, satire and individuality," says Jogen Chowdhury, 81. Though exhibiting together, they don't have much in common except their shared preoccupation with human theatre. Khakhar reimagined Bombay's daily life as a candy-coloured fantasy. Much has been said about his sexuality and quirks, which found vivid expression in his art. Based in West Bengal, Chowdhury's figures are less flashy but equally whimsical, as seen in the unusual 'Representative from Hell', on view in *Proximate Paths*.

2. SOME THINGS ARE ALWAYS BURNING

Aditi Singh

CHEMOULD PRESCOTT ROAD, MUMBAI

(Until March end)

A horizon line, mountains and fragments of petals–Aditi Singh's series of inks abound in nature motifs. Singh says she sees herself as a "meditative walker" fond of collecting rocks and shredded corals. She even has an "open eye of a Halibut" from her treks. Walking and exploring the world through acts of adventure has brought the Mumbai artist closer to her art. "The glistening reds of an oleander tree, a nursery of dark firs gathered quiet by a cliff's white elbow. We take life from it, and it lives through us," she says, waxing poetic.

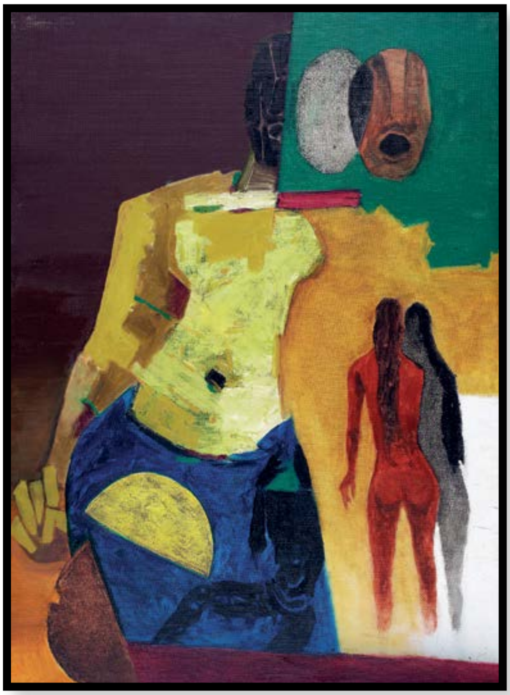
3. THE (IN)VISIBLE AND THE (UN)REVEALED

Kartick Chandra Pyne

EMAMI ART, KOLKATA

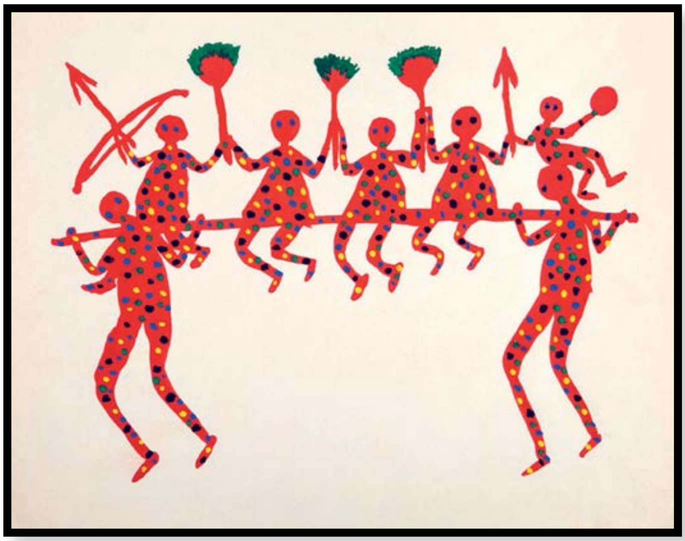
(March 20-June 19)

In the Bengali-speaking world, Ganesh Pyne is a star but his lesser-known sibling Kartick Chandra Pyne is believed to have a more devoted following. He, however, has not found recognition beyond Bengal. Eager to change that perception, this show will exhibit a wide array of his paintings and show why their "complex connections to the world, erotic desires and fantasy make it uniquely modern", says Richa Agarwal, CEO, Emami Art.



④ 'Arrival' by M.F. Husain

⑤ Artwork by Bhuri Bai



4. WAYS OF SEEING

A group show
DAG, NEW DELHI
(Feb. 5 - March 7)

Women are often turned into objects in art, but do women paint differently than men? DAG's *Ways of Seeing* presents female and male artists paralleling the modern art movement in India. The 180 works include those by M.V. Dhurandhar, Nandalal Bose, M.F. Husain, Amrita Sher-Gil, Madhvi Parekh and others. Curator Kishore Singh says, "Discussions about the differences in the way men and women create and experience art have now entered our discourse, making the exhibit interesting and historic."

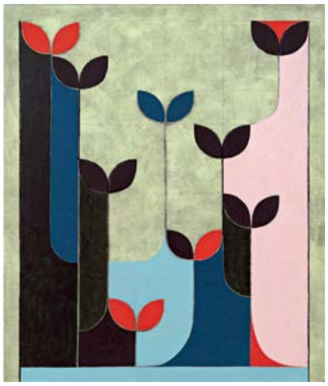
5. MY LIFE AS AN ARTIST

Bhuri Bai
MUSEUM OF ART & PHOTOGRAPHY (MAP), BENGALURU
(Until Feb. 28)

Designed to allow the pioneering indigenous artist Bhuri Bai to tell her inspiring story in her own voice, this four-part virtual show takes you through her artistic journey, from her poor childhood in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh, to a life-altering meeting with J. Swaminathan. The first woman from the adivasi Bhil community to work with paper and canvas, Bai's paintings exude a joy rarely seen in urban art worlds.

–Shaikh Ayaz

OTHER ROOMS, OTHER WONDERS



THE NEW ARABESQUE

Nature Morte, New Delhi
(Until Feb. 14)
Iranian abstract artist Kamrooz Aram's first foray in India blurs the boundaries between East and West

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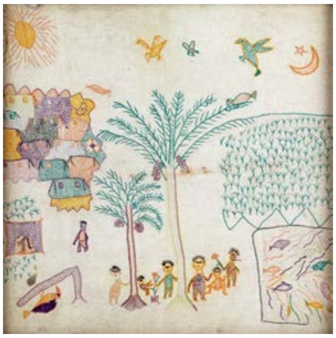

NESTLED

Experimenter, Kolkata
(Until March 31)
Mentor Meera Mukherjee showcases her hand-embroidered works alongside protégé Adip Dutta's

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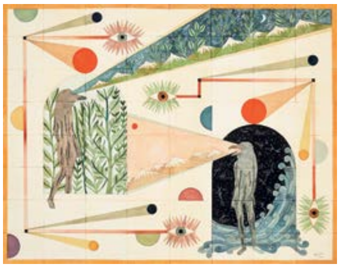

BIRTH OF A NEW WORLD

Tarq, Mumbai
(Until Feb. 27)
Rithika Merchant's skilful watercolours and collages draw attention to her affinities with nature and infinity

JAISON G

Q+A

Hitting the High Note

When **Bombay Jayashri Ramnath** heard she was being awarded the Padma Shri last week, the vocalist again resolved to make the world a better place with her music

What's the first thing you felt when you heard you were receiving a Padma Shri?
I felt a rush of emotions. I felt blessed for being born in a family that afforded me the joy and luxury of music, a sense of gratitude for the journey I have been blessed with–my gurus, co-artistes and all the support I have received along the way that has enabled me to do all the things I do with music. I was honestly tearing up when I heard the news even as my phone beeped non-stop with wishes from family, friends, colleagues and fans.

You have, almost for a decade now, used music as a way to communicate with children and underprivileged kids in particular. What are the rewards of teaching music to kids?
Every time a child looks at a musical note in a refreshing way, I feel a sense of wow. Every time, a young girl from Manjakkudi (a village in Kumbakkonam, Tamil Nadu) tells me she sings a song in her little hut every evening after her mother lights a lamp, I smile. Every time a child tells me she or he scored better marks in Maths because of the simple calculations we teach them to understand music, I am amazed at how they made the connection between music and mathematics.

What have you learnt while teaching children with special needs?
Even though I step into a class thinking I'm their teacher, almost always, the roles are reversed. Often children with special needs are labelled as not having enough focus, but it's amazing to see how focused they are. Sometimes they listen and sing with such rapt attention that they are not even blinking and I have to ensure that I don't allow myself to be distracted either because they consume me with such attention and affection, all at the same time.

During the pandemic, you were fairly active on social media. Your initiative, the 'Moon Child', a series featuring original lullabies from across India, was particularly beautiful. What triggered that idea?
Nearly 20 years ago, I had worked on an idea called 'Vaatsalyam' which was a compilation of lullabies. Through the lockdown, I began re-visiting the treasure trove of lullabies that I had learnt, growing up. Sometimes in the frenetic pace of a performance career, gems like these get left behind.

–with Akhila Krishnamurthy

INDIA TODAY

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JUST A TAP AWAY

9:41

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